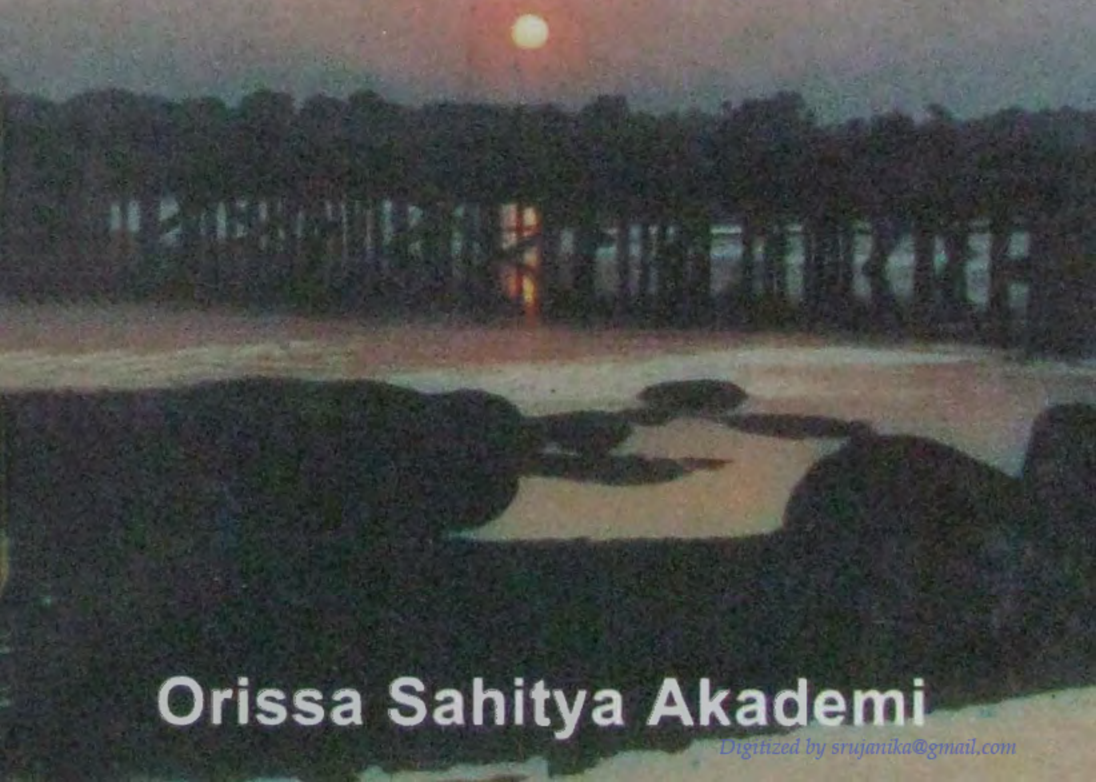
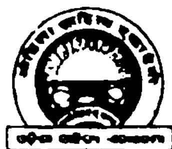
QUIET FLOWS THE MAHANADI



Orissa Sahitya Akademi

QUIET FLOWS THE MAHANADI

Edited by
Dr Prafulla Kumar Mohanty



ORISSA SAHITYA AKADEMI

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(An anthology of Oriya short stories)

Edited by

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PREFACE

Short Story is a popular form of literary genre commonly acclaimed by a good number of readers in every language. This is also applicable to Oriya literature. *Rebati*, the first story of this language, was published a century ago and its author Fakir Mohan Senapati adorns the pride of place even today. Over the years, the short story has grown effective and powerful both in form and content. The post-independence literary scenario has been one of constant experimentation. Young and energetic groups of new contributors to this genre have added freshness and vigour. Reflecting as they do the multi-faceted life styles and traditions of Orissa, Oriya stories have successfully carved out a special niche in the literary map of the country. This collection intends to expose to the non-Oriya readers the aesthetic virtuosity of the storytellers of our time. The tradition of story telling had its origin in the fables like *Jataka Katha* which have snowballed into a massive oral tradition culminating in a wide variety of stories of our times. The writers represented in this volume have been keen on projecting the changing mood of the times in keeping with the psychosocial changes around them.

This anthology aims at featuring the stories of all the Orissa Sahitya Akademi Awardees in translation with the hope of introducing them both at the national and at the international forum. The translations are seemingly done with understated impulses to safeguard the inner beauty and simplicity of the original stories. Many of the stories mirror the emotional framework; primarily embodying the sustained drive to speak something concrete of one's own soil. The ambience provided by them captures the nuances of the Oriya middle class life.

The Mahanadi, in the history and culture of Orissa, is the lifeline of people of this part of the country and it evokes a surge of emotions sacrosanct to the Oriya psyche. Its vast watercourse cradles several zones of the state nourishing overwhelmingly the imagination of onlookers, artists and the common man alike. This, in fact, has inspired us to choose the title *Quiet Flows the Mahanadi*, a metaphor stemming from the depths of its archetypal core presupposing continuity.

We are thankful to the translators who have extended their ungrudging help in giving this volume a shape. Our thanks are due to Dr. P. K. Mohanty, the noted scholar and critic who has taken a lot of pains in editing this volume. Our special thanks are due to Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre, Kolkata for providing funds without which this representative volume would not have seen the light of day. We shall be happy, if this book satisfies the curiosity of the short story lovers and arouses their expectations in knowing more about the vistas of Orissan life.

Aswini Kumar Mishra
Secretary
Orissa Sahitya Akademi

From the Editor ......

Fiction, particularly the short story is often dismissed by the champions of literature as pedestrian art. But if any literary genre has sustained the reading habit of men and women in the twentieth century all over the world, it is the short story. In the history of Oriya literature fiction was the last to arrive, but it is the most productive area in literature, and the most popular with the readers.

The Oriya short story completed its first centenary in 1998: a feat unique to Oriya literature. The first story in the language was written in 1898 much before most other Indian *bhasa* literatures conceived of the nuances of short fiction or story. But the dust of critical controversy has not yet settled around the title of the first Indian story. Fakirmohan Senapati is the undisputed originator of the short story genre in Oriya literature; but there is no general agreement whether *Lachhmania* or *Rebati* is the first Oriya short story. If *Lachhmania* is accepted as the first short story, the date goes back to 1868 when it was first published in the columns of *Bodhadayini* and *Sambadabahika*. But critics do not accept it as a short story, rather it is presumed to be a synoptic outline of *Lachhama*, a historical novel, which Fakirmohan completed, at a later period. All discerning scholars and literary historians however, celebrate *Rebati* as the first Oriya short story which is one of the earliest in India's regional literatures.

The past hundred years of short stories in the Oriya language, in one sense, present a perspective of the changing contours of Oriya life, and in another sense, document the lexical, and rhythmic changes

that have appeared in the Oriya language. From Fakirmohan's *Rebati* to, say, Chandrasekhar Rath's *The Gradually Deepening River* (Kramashah Gavira Nai) the progressive, the sporadic, nonlinear and the psychic changes manifesting in the lives of the Oriyas have been fictionalized in diverse styles. The themes, narrative techniques and the dimensions of space and time make the Oriya story-century a saga of psychosocial growth of a people moving towards realization of their life potential. If Fakirmohan as the pioneering storyteller has recreated the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century village reality with people, manners and cultural thrusts of his contemporary experience, the later story writers have responded to their own reality and social ethos to carve out their image of Orissa and the world. The life depicted in the short stories, however, is primarily of rural Orissa. Even the urban life encountered in the late twentieth century stories has a memory of rural simplicity and moral concerns. The sophisticated nuances of modernity noticed in some of the stories written by the new generation of writers too have a contrastive rural innocence for effect.

The short story, like fiction in general, is a typically middle class pastime as it reflects the life rhythms of people who are above ordinariness and beneath aristocracy and royalty. In the beginning of the twentieth century in Orissa there was hardly any middle class, but a vigorous beginning of education, especially modern education introduced by the missionaries and the British masters, was opening up new horizons. Business, job opportunities and socio-economic interactions paved the way for the emergence of a viable middle class. The awakening generations at the beginning of the century were given

a goal and purpose when the Utkal Sammilani was launched in 1903 to agitate for a separate province for the Oriya speaking people. Magazines and newspapers appeared during this period as a measure of the Oriya nationalistic fervour committed to fight for identity. Stories of moral fortitude, patriotism, sacrifice for noble causes and historical pride were written by the educated and creative people. But magazines and periodicals were few and far between in the early decades of the century and the readership was limited to a few pockets in and around Cuttack, Sambalpur and Balasore. This lack and other infrastructural inadequacies restricted and halted the growth of the short story in the post-Fakirmohan period.

In the thirties again a new surge and growth in the Oriya short story was experienced when writers like Nityananda Mohapatra, Ananta Prasad Panda, Sachi Routray, Kalindi Charan Panigrahi, Rajkishore Patnaik, Bhagabati Charan Panigrahi and Godavarish Mohaptra and others came upon the scene. These writers carried forward the Oriya identity gained in the wake of the formation of the separate state of Orissa in 1936 and enriched the language by their human content and stylistic excellence. But it was Gopinath Mohanty who in his stories and novels provided a deeper insight into the human condition, and created characters beyond the two - dimensional variety of black and white. Gopinath Mohanty considered human totality against the apparent realism of his setting and characters. His language, in its poetic and symbolic cadences made his smaller people appear vast and messianic. Bibhutibhusan Tripathy, Pranabandhu Kar and others introduced the psychoanalytic treatment in their stories and Rajkishore Roy gave a romantic colour to theme and character. At independence

it was Rajkishore Roy, all the way, with his lofty tone and larger than life characters.

The modern temper in the Oriya short story was noticed only in the late forties, in the stories of Surendra Mohanty. His *Krushnachuda* and *Roti O' Chandra* deviated in tone and spirit from the entire inheritance of the Oriya short story. He created what can be termed, an anti-story genre, and anti-heroes and non-heroes. The experiential content of his stories was uncommon although the frame often was realistic Brahmananda Panda, Manoj Das, Kishori Charan Das and Akhilmohan Patnaik reinvented the modern Oriya short story in the lineage of Surendra Mohanty. But Manoj Das and Kishori Charan Das later grew beyond Surendra Mohanty. Manoj Das probed the inner being of man and placed him in the metaphysical context of human existence. He discovered both evil and angelic essence in man but did not find an atmosphere or situation in the human world for the furtherance of the angelic essence. He connects man with the supernal and the supernatural in his *Kimbhirini*, *Abupurusha* and *Laxmi* and relates them to higher essences. But the higher essences turn effete and perish. Manoj Das like Mohapatra Nilamani Sahu and Akhil Mohan Patnaik comes to grips with the ambrosial universe but finally surrenders to reality. Kishori Charan Das, similarly, tries to find vertical associations with the suprahuman essence within the middle class setting, and apparently normal social men and women. He, however, compromises for survival. Santanu Kumar Acharya on the other hand accepts the challenges of life in the here and now. His characters try to change the obtaining social order not by classical values but by protest and even left-wing violence. His existential characters endowed with

naxalite or communist philosophy demonstrate native human power and energy but fail to recreate order or harmony in the chaos around. They fail to make the world free of evil in its present form of corruption and organized violence. Krushna Prasad Mishra in his stories presents a sick society where perverts and obsessed people move in search of private and personal *mokshya* . Chandrasekhar Rath is the modern bridge to classical values. His stories always project the angel in man. He never allows evil to dominate and counters that evil by nonviolent values of the classical order.

Among the women short story writers Prativa Roy and Binapani Mohanty stand out not as feminists but as traditionalists with ennobling awareness of women in reality. In their women there is no bitterness against the *yang* values, nor do they project the suffering of women in our male dominated society. Instead, they bring out the shaping spirit of feminine essence by reinventing classical and modern figures. As a result their stories emit a soft charm. Others like Yasodhara Mishra and Susmita Bagchi have searched for the special soul of women in the available context of life they encounter in the society. The women writers, however, have not discovered a special language or metaphorical base for women. The familiar reality has not been transcended by the discovery of new and more relevant feminine essence.

Another group of writers, headed by popular writers like Bibhuti Patnaik, present contemporary life more for entertainment than for any commitment to literary faith. The joys and sorrows of ordinariness in readable prose cater to the non-serious readers. The proliferation of magazines - monthly, weekly, and the literary sections of daily papers

- has given birth to a breed of story tellers who merely hold the mirror, often seeing their own faces with satisfaction. There are also others who criticize the new-values without offering alternatives. But the undeniable vitality of the language has been discovered by these storytellers in attractive ways.

What the Oriya story-century mostly misses are the primordial metaphors, the elemental signposts of nature. The sea, the mountains, the jungle are singularly absent in the short stories. And naturally, therefore, the vast overhanging canopy of the azure sky remains virtually unmanifest. A sense of the primal mystery of life is seldom encountered in the socially preoccupied men and women moving in the drawing rooms, bed rooms or the dark dungeons of their own psyche. The elemental strife between passion and the overseeing Order is almost an alien experience here as in the Pan-Indian short story. Man is often portrayed as victim. He is tormented by the system operating in the society, be it administration or customs or even relationships that fail to rise above the narrow confines of the self.

The failure of man to raise his heroic temper to counter the onslaughts of inhumanity is seen almost in all fictional constructs. The result of this victim complex is a willing surrender to irony. Fakirmohan, the father of the Oriya short story, had given two contrastive yet complementary models of the man-reality symbiosis. In *Rabati* the symbiosis was somewhat ironical; man's soft innocent ambitions were thwarted by a malevolent sky. The innocent desire of the young girl Rebati to study in school, and to love a man of noble nature seem to violate the order which crushes her and all those who were dear to her, under the irrational weight of divine wrath. The story

is a reconstruction of the classical Greek model of moira where human innocence or heroism is ironically related to reality. But Fakirmohan also gave us the other model where Christ-like man can take upon himself the cross of human misery. In his *Randipua Ananta* (The Widow-son Ananta). Fakirmohan has shown how a boy hated by society as a scoundrel, good-for-nothing brat, saves the people of his village during floods, sacrificing his own life. The Oriya short story moved for a long time between these two value-constructs. It has not yet found out another viable construct to project another identity. Yet the post-Independence short story has come of age. The complexities of modern man, confrontations with authoritarianism, philosophical musings upon the fundamental issues of existence, analysis of relationships and above all a sense of transcendence of earthy materialities have given the Oriya short story a larger area of human viability. The quest for divinity and elemental certainties within the frailties of existence is a major achievement of the Oriya short story. New frontiers also have been created in language, form and technique which place the Oriya short story amongst the best in the genre in India and the world.

The Orissa Sahitya Academy award-winning writers included in this volume are a sampling of the best talents in the short story genre. If the stories are enjoyed by the readers, particularly the non-Oriya readers, I will feel rewarded.

P. K. Mohanty

BOULI

Raj Kishore Ray

It was twilight - time for the herd to return.

The duffadar babu crossed over the village path hedged with screw pines and stepped into Bhajani Pradhan's veranda. He was returning from the police station. Having carried on his shoulders the burden of dozens of litigations and their momentous decisions all these years. this man had acquired an odd stooping posture. The brass buttons on his uniform shone bright being scrubbed with ashes. In his hand was a thick bunch of papers.The cardboard cover on the papers was smudgy and black by fingerprint ink. A string, for no reason, was dangling on the papers.

Sarasi, Bhajani's wife, was mopping the mud platform about the tulasi with a rag when the duffadar babu arrived. Pulling softly the veil over her head, she spread a reed - mat for him on the veranda. He would most invariably drop in at her house on his way back from the police station, for she was his goddaughter. He would ask her this and that about her welfare. Behind this, however, was his self-interest. Through the conversation he would find out about the aubergines she grew in the kitchen garden, Ujala's milk and Patani's butter. Duffadar babu was greedy for all these things.

Bhajani grew crops and raised the cattle, and Sarasi worshipped Goddess Lakshmi every Thursday, drawing with powdered rice dainty patterns of Her symbolic footprints in the eastern corner of the house. Though poor, her heart was thrilled with everything she had - a loving husband, on the one hand, to whom she was devoted, and the apples of her eyes on the other : Ujala, Patani and Manguli, all cows, as also Jagannath and Balbhadra, the gentle bullocks, rightly named after the deities.

At daybreak when the sky overflowed with sunshine, Sarasi's milk-pan, tucked between her thighs, filled to the brim when she milked Ujala. Even as life seemed replete with such fulfilling chores, Sarasi felt deep within her heart an emptiness, peculiarly feminine, which neither her workaholic husband nor the animals ever understood. The milk flowed into

the pan in copious jets. White, thick and frothy milk. Bouli, the calf of Ujala, would snuggle up to Sarasi, and its muzzle would caress her all over the arms and the back. The wet touch was so tender and thrilling ! But it made Sarasi feel the emptiness all the more intensely.

She had heard the lore of Jasoda and Banamali sung in the village community hall. She had seen Jasoda's love for Balagopal, and her heart-rending wail when she did not find Krishna following the herd with his jaunty gait, all enacted in the village theatre. The scenes of Krishna's raiding the pots of milk and cream and the fear on his face as He stood glued to the wall when the mother had got to know about His peccadillo, stuck in her mind. She longed for having a child as naughty and playful as Krishna. How much she wanted a little one to toddle about her with an impish smile on his lips, and fall upon the milk-pan filled with Ujala's milk. The pan never looked full to Sarasi although milk had touched the brim and about to spill over.

'Has Bhajani been to the fields?' The duffadar babu began his conversation with a sly smile.

'Yes', answered Sarasi, half-hidden behind the door. 'Must be on his way back home', she added. By then she had already served him rice-flakes, cottage-cheese and fresh jaggery. Having had his fill of the delicious repast the old man began, 'Listen, Sara, there will be a livestock fair in Cuttack. Why don't you ask Bhajani to take Ujala and Patani there? I am sure they will steal the show. You both have kept them so well - groomed and polished that flies would slip off their skin. Bhajani ought to take them there. There is a cash prize for the owner of the winning cow'.

'How much is that ?' Sarasi asked.

'Two scores and ten', answered the duffadar babu.

'So much!'

'Yes, indeed. The boss at the police station has asked me to spread the word among the village folks. All arrangements have been made for the food and shelter of the people and animals attending the fair. Maybe I will myself persuade Bhajani to go there if I happen to meet him on the way'

'It's all very well, sir. But he has to take a couple of days off his work in order to go there. The prize - money is only a distant prospect. What he needs right away is the money for the trip. Doesn't he?'

While the conversation was going on between the duffadar babu and Sarasi, Panchua had stopped there with Kalia, his dog. He heard what the duffadar babu said. Kalia was pretty smart for a country dog, although having no pedigree to boast of. He would seize a bull or a cow at the bidding of his master. The love between the dog and the master was the talk of the village. It seemed as if the reputation of the dog had rubbed off on the master.

'Why, it is Panchu! Why don't you take Kalia to Cuttack? For all you know this rascal may win a prize.' the duffadar babu pointed a finger to Kalia as he spoke to Panchu.

'Can this dog of ordinary breed really make it?'
Panchu asked disbelievingly, running his hand over Kalia's head. Kalia thumped the ground with his tail and scratched it to assure the master that he was game for the event.

Kantha the priest had also arrived there. He was a man of many parts, both pious and profane. He had toned up his physique at a gym at Puri in his younger days. Later he took to priesthood as a profession at a Shiva temple. Side by side he learnt and mastered the skill of slaughtering animals for meat. Most of his patrons were school and college kids, from whom he charged a fee of two rupees for his services. The savage business of the day being over, he would return to the pieties of evening services he offered to lord Shiva in the temple. The vermilion mark stretching from his forehead to the tip of the nose was a livid testimony to his strenuous vocations. The towel hung around his brawny shoulders rose and fell rhythmically as he walked with his heavy steps. It also responded to the pitch and rhythm of his speech. Kantha stood behind Panchu. He too was eager to know what the duffadar babu was talking about. The latter now turned to him and addressed him facetiously, 'Won't your ewe dance, my lord?'

'That's no big deal, Your Highness. Please be seated, and you shall have the show at once. Kantha swanked and summoned his pet to the duffadar's presence with an air of aplomb. To most people this scene gave an odd sense of *deja vu*. Nevertheless its theatricality had some freshness about it, owing primarily to the piquant flavour that Kantha's Puri lingo and accent had.

Kantha's ewe was enormous in size, with lush, glossy hair about its neck like the mane of a lion. Her massive horns coiled around the head like the side - whiskers of a sardarji and made it look belligerent. Kantha had spent a fortune to raise it, and had refused to sell it to a butcher even for forty rupees.

Two days after, at the crack of dawn, the villagers saw Kantha striding along the embankment of the river with the ewe trotting by his side. Behind him walked Panchu tugging at the strap around Kalia's neck. Last in this curious procession was Bhajani, with Ujala and Bouli following him at an even pace.

The livestock and agricultural exhibition was held on a large ground in Cuttack. The cattle, farm - products, the shabby peasants and the other country hicks looked out of place in the genteel, urban surroundings of Cuttack. Nonetheless it was a big event.

Lost in a sea of people, Panchu,Kantha and Bhajani were at their wit's end. The animals were hungry and a bundle of nerves. The sound of motor horn had startled the ewe, and twice it snapped the rope and ran off in panic. The long, tiresome journey took its toll on Ujala's energy. She could barely stand on her feet, and her eyes filled with tears. Bhajani had carried Bouli for a long stretch of the journey, but he had to put it down. The rest of the journey proved too much for the four-month old calf. It lay tired and still on the fair-ground. It had grown up on a diet of powdered green gram, but to its misfortune, nothing was available at the fair except hay, which it could not eat. Bhajani told one of the organizers about the calf's plight. The man in question asked him to approach someone else, who in turn sent him to yet another man. Bhajani had no patience and energy to follow this rigmarole up to its end.

Suddenly shouts went up : 'The minister's car ! ' Voices rose all around : 'The sahib's car. Clear out, make way'. This, hullabaloo got on Kalia's nerves. He had been quietly eyeing the fleshy chickens in the coops until then. Now that his peace of mind was broken, he burst into angry barks.

The meeting began. Panchu, Kantha and Bhajani stood huddled in the crowd expectantly while their stomachs rumbled in hunger. They wanted to see what 'the minister' looked like. But all they could see were the sweaty human bodies and faces jostling against one another and raising a cloud of

dust. They heard a lot of things, though. The public address system blared :'You ought to learn things from Holland and Denmark, and look after the cattle just as they do in Denmark. Feed them well and improve their hygiene for your own profit. You would do well reading the treatises already available on the subject of dairy-farming. We have with us a Denmark-trained expert, who will enlighten you on how to build ideal cow-shed. We have also in our midst another expert on poultry-farming, who will..' The minister thus held forth, and so did the dairy and poultry experts when their turns came. Strange-sounding words fell thick and fast on the crowd like hail-stones. Panchu, Kantha and Bhajani merely looked on, dumbfounded.

'An important announcement', boomed the loudspeaker. 'The Hon'ble minister congratulates the department of agriculture for making this fair a grand success. As a token of his appreciation, the minister sahib will present cash award of one hundred rupees to the officials of the department.

The meeting was over. Panchu, Kantha and Bhajani looked at one another's face. Another announcement followed: 'here are the names of the animals awarded a cash prize of fifty rupees each. Paata, the cow of the Mahant Maharaj of Cuttack, has been adjudged the best cow. The prize for the best dog goes to Lily, the bitch of the deputy magistrate Mr. Bhattacharya. The Darling Ewe of Abu Hassan, the prominent businessman of the town, bags the prize for the best ewe. As for the best goat, the prize goes to...

Speechless, Panchu and Bhajani exchanged glances, while Kantha gawked at Sharif Mian, the meat king of Cuttack, who was scouting around the fairground for the stuff he could have at an easy bargain.

The three hopefuls had run out of their money. It now seemed pretty scary having to trudge a distance of thirty-six miles back to the village without a paisa in hand. Bhajani had spent the twelve annas given to him by Sarasi on fodder and flattened rice. Whatever little money Kantha had, he had spent on opium dope, without which he could not do.

The country dog Kalia was not a saleable commodity. Panchu felt safe on that account. Ujala and Bouli, the mother and daughter, were inseparable from Bhajani's life. So selling them off was simply out of question. That left the ewe, and it had caught Sharif Mian's attention. Kantha sold him his splendid possession for only five rupees. He had to, for the fire of hunger raging within had to be somehow put out.

They set out homewards. Silent all the way. Bouli's condition had turned from bad to worse. Its belly had distended and the poor thing groaned and belched forth blood. Bhajani's shoulders had gone raw from carrying the sick calf all the distance from the fairground. Juana trailed behind, completely worn down from hunger and long journey. The tears which had been flowing from her eyes ever since she left the village had not dried even for a while. Kalia scampered wearily, and at times he drew closer to Ujala to sniff at her near the ear, making a gesture of sympathy. After walking a little further Bhajani brought Bouli off his shoulders, and tearfully said, 'It's all over with Bouli, Panchu.' Kantha and Panchu bent over the calf, as it lay dead on the road. The last trickle of blood from its mouth had drained away its life.

Dusk had fallen. The stars in the sky glittered silently. Bhajani looked up at the sky and said to Kantha piteously. 'Tell me priest, how will I face Sara? She will be absolutely crestfallen to hear about Bouli's death. God never filled her womb; she had only Bouli as her daughter.

'Bhajani, my brother, roll Bouli down the road and forget about her', Kantha said wiping the vermilion mark off his forehead for the last time - and in fact he never wore it again. He added after a moment's pause, 'It is our destiny. After all we are poor'.

All began to move except Kalia. He chose to stay back with the carcass for a while, and sniffed it.

Tr. by Ashok Kumar Mohapatra

THE NESTLED

Basant Kumar Satpathy

"Do you hear me?"
"Yes, speak."
"Come in and look around."
"Wait a while. I've just put the thermometer in Bulbul's mouth."
"How high is Jhunjhuni's temperature?"
"Her's is normal. Bulbul's might be normal, too. His body feels quite cool."
"Did you give the medicine at 3 in the morning?"
"Damn, damn you! You were to wake me up. Didn't the alarm work?"
"It did. But I was asleep. Too tired, rushing about the whole day. Must have visited the hospital at least ten times. Not slept a wink for three nights. Did you wake up to the alarm bell?"
"If, with the clock so close to your ears, you couldn't hear, how could I, lying in the other room? And that too at 3 in the morning?"
"Now things have gone very difficult. The doctor had repeatedly cautioned. See that the medicine is given on time, or else, it may not work."
"Then why are you so carelessly asleep? Leave it. After all, the fever of both has subsided. The thermometer reads only 97 under Bulbul's tongue. Why are you calling me? Is it so urgent? Won't you bear with me a while till I give them each a cup of horlicks."
"It's not so urgent. I'm breaking down the sparrow's nest. They've, perhaps, again arrived this year. The entire floor of the house is left with the jhoti of the drops of filth, littered with bunches of straw. Eh, they've dropped some here on this radio, too."
"See that you don't touch the sparrow's nest! I'm coming."
"What crime! It's only last year's dead nest. This is November. Are the sparrows still asleep inside? Only a heap of straw hanging in bunches.

Didn't you see how they harassed us last year? The eggs broke. The fledg'lings fell down and died. How much anger, dissension, wrangling! This year before it is too late..."

"Swear on my head, you'll never touch the sparrows' nest. Bulbul, my father, Tuni, my mother, allow me to go! Do you feel better? Didn't the horlicks taste sweet? Give me the cups. Now wrap yourselves and lie down sideways for a while like good children, lest you catch cold. Good children, wonderful, our children are so good! Go to sleep. You'll have fruit juice when you get up. Yes, this way. Fine. Let me go. There from the other room your father is calling me."

"So you're here. Did the children go to sleep? Look at that corner, the mid-floor, the radio and wall close to the table. Indeed, I see they have started coming again. Again they'll build their nest. Get me the chair; I'll demolish the nest. Fetch me the broomstick, I'll sweep the floor. So unclean! People will call us forest-dwellers."

Don't you have any other work in the morning? Chasing the innocent birds! Doesn't this house contain dogs, cats, rats, mice, lizards, cockroaches, mosquitoes, flies etc? There is dust flying in from the road. Are you able to prevent those tyrannies, oppressions, vexations?"

"Last year you're so annoyed with the birdies. Did some one breathe some mantra into your ears this year? Which dharma has indoctrinated you - Buddhism or Jainism?"

"No, no. Why do you entertain this apprehension? I'm not speaking of the *Gita* or *Bhagavata*. I don't intend to turn an Avadhuta, making the dove my Guru, either. Yet have you ever thought how at times even these little creatures, to us, endear themselves?"

"These mad sparrows? Even a *tittibha* bird troubled the sea."

"Yes, even a negligible *tittibha* had disturbed the sea. Why? Because the sea had swept away its eggs and its nest. You're another sort of bird: what is it to the tailorbird, let the wind blow, it'll only swing its nest. You left the two sick children in my charge and dropped off to sleep comfortably. Who have our children company all night? Who watched them? Who lent me strength?"

"Those birds? I was sleeping in that room. Only a wall in between. Who are you so afraid of?"

"To lean on you is as good as not to lean on you. Never in my life did I live through such a bleak night like the last. New moon, solar eclipse, the comet-all combined. On top of it, a neighbour had hanged himself only five days ago. And the two kiddies running unprecedented fever. Their bodies were burning with high temperature. And sometimes they were in senses and sometimes not. Which woman, however bold, can bear to see this with her courage uncracked? Do men ever understand women's suffering? They only coax and cajole them and spend their time merrily like male bees."

"Glory to goddess Kali Why have you started reciting the *Kali Bhagavata* (quarreling episode) right from the morning? If I was asleep, why didn't you rouse me? Had we kept watch by shift, it won't have strained you so much. You won't have lost your temper on me."

"You would have kept awake! You're a Kumbhakarna. When did you go to sleep? Just at eleven. And you began snoring two minutes past eleven! How loud you snore! The whole house rises and falls. Who is so unkind as to dare disturb your sleep at that hour?

"All right. What was to happen has happened. When did the children's temperature come down? You must have put a wet band. The thermometer read 103 in their armpits at 10.30. I had seen it."

"I, too, was overwhelmed by deep sleep. I'm ashamed to think of it. How do humans go to sleep at a time when the house is sinking? Who can say what would have happened to us by now. It all appears a dream to me. I couldn't know at all when the eyes closed as I began sitting, leaning on the arm chair."

"Oh! What a misfortune!! Then you haven't given the medicine. What a disaster!"

"Listen! Why're you so impatient? My sleep was suddenly disturbed as though by the sound of some one's voice. It appeared Bulbul and Jhunjhuni were chirping together 'Mother! Mother!' I sat up, startled out of sleep. I put my hands on both of them and found their bodies fire hot. Both lay

unconscious. I called them loudly, shook them. But they lay motionless and still. With my heart seized with fear, I entered your room. The clock struck 12.30. I called you twice but you didn't respond. Confused, I rushed back to the children. Put the wet band on their foreheads again and again. I rubbed these despicable eyes with my wet fingers lest they close. Lord! How dreadful, how endless appears the night to one who stands alone, especially by the side of the sick. With undivided attention I sat down for half an hour. The hand was working like a machine, lifting the band, wetting it and putting it back again. The fever, I felt, had subsided. I breathed a sigh of relief. I put out the big lamp. Only the zero lamp was burning. In the midst of these few minutes of fear and anxiety I felt as though life had left me."

"Why were you so afraid? Didn't you rely on the doctor's word? Besides, the room was lighted. The windows were all shut and in the adjoining room I..."

"You're talking so much because it's already morning. Had you been in my situation, you would have gone delirious. Have you heard of the roar of midnight? Even the night has a language. 'The night roars' my old grandmother had said. And that I realized only last night at this age. To add to this, there was the snorting of the children, the constant chirping of the cricket outside, the humming of the mosquitoes, even the throbbing of the electric meter. I could hear my breathing even in the midst of all these sounds. The palpitations of the children's hearts, the throbbing of my heart, your snoring, the ticking of the clock, none of these sounds could escape my ears. Sometimes it appeared to me as if the dense darkness outside was knocking against the windows for a little shelter, signalling me to open. Once mistakenly I even opened the door and looked outside. The darkness was so deep that I would have lost my eyes had I stared a little longer. Even now I tremble when I look back."

"Your description frightens me even this early morning."

"You can't assess or imagine the feeling, the fear I felt. I felt great pains. Had an owl hooted or a male jackal howled or a bat fluttered then, you would now be preparing my coffin."

"What silly things you speak! Does life find such an easy exit? Why didn't you light the big lamp?"
"I did. There was no way out. But what was it that came again? Again that squeaking. Just the same sound which I had mistaken in my dream or drowsiness for Bulbul's and Jhunjhuni's call of 'Mother! Mother! the same sound that had made me sit up in bed a moment ago."
"Wasn't it a rat?"
"I, too, had thought that way in the beginning. I looked around the bottom of the bookshelf, the window corner, the corner of the room where the old shoes were dumped. I searched. But where was it? Thought it was the children's congested chest. I laid my ears on their chests one by one, and listened. There was no choking off the throat. Their breathing was heavy but unobstructed. I was afraid again."
"Yet why didn't you call me?"
"If you couldn't hear the call so near, how could you, lying in the other room, hear me?"
"Why didn't you walk in?"
"Had I the courage then! The passage, the verandah-all was dark. Thought of calling you loudly. But the throat was choked. Just then the same squeaking was heard. Luckily I had lighted up the big lamp. Or else, I would have fainted this time. Casually I looked up. And on that little hanging electric wire...."
"That wire dangling down that old plank near the square one?"
"Yes, there, yes! I saw something resembling two small balls of dirty cotton. Two balls of cotton detached while the mattress was being stitched, and sticking. Or, was it the two woolen badminton balls, now old and dust-brown, which I had brought for Bulbul and Jhunjhuni. But while I was thinking how it could generate sound, I found the piece of wire and with it these two round things trembling. Soon I could see along with the two black round eyes of each a small beak looking like red wheat."
"Glory to God! Didn't you finish the two with a stick?"
"You won't have mouthed these words had you seen it. Two little creatures sitting huddled together as though a maker of clay models had set

them up on a stick in a doll exhibition. Dazzled by the light, they were both sitting like fools. Yet it seemed to me as if some one had sent them from the skies through the roof to guard, to protect our two children and me. Indeed, after seeing them, I thought myself no longer alone and friendless and helpless. Now we were five."

"They were lying there in hiding like thieves from the evening. Their deep sleep was disturbed by light."

"Might be. But seeing those birdies awake in the swing overhead, I knew light might be troubling my children's eyes. Bulbul and Jhunjhuni also turned their sides mumbling. Now I became bold. I entered your room to check up whether it was already 3 o'clock. But it was only ten minutes past one. These ten minutes weighed heavily on me like ten hours. I put out the big lamp. I didn't see whether the children's temperature had gone up or down. For it was no use seeing it then."

"These two birds were born last year. The two who had worried us? They are very clever, don't easily forget their old nests."

"They were not born last year. These two are fledg'lings. Because we broke their eggs down, destroyed their nests and drove them away, they've somewhere hatched another pack of eggs, and have returned to their old place. Though born birds, their attachment to their native place is no less strong. Perhaps they intend to habilitate their fledg'lings here."

"Sparrows hatching eggs in November. Isn't it untimely?"

"They also have learnt it from men. Here are more funny things. Listen. I sat there for twenty to twenty-five minutes with my hands working like a machine, wetting the band and putting it on their foreheads. Now I was not so afraid. For the thought that we were five lent me strength. The only sound was the rhythm of the tick-tick-ticking of your clock with the thump-thump-thumping of my heart. The music of my heart lulled me to sleep. Relief, indeed brings sleep to man."

"That sense of relief lasted then till morning. What about medicine?"

"Wait. Why do you shout 'medicine, medicine'? I see men have no patience at all. Then, Oh! What a nightmare !! It seems so real to me even now. I felt as if an old witch quietly ran away with my two kids in her fists.

She would roast them with sauce for her rice gruel. 'Rush in', I muttered in a state of delirium, 'some one has carried away and killed our children'. Hardly had I uttered these words when the house was filled with twittering, which deafened my ears. In a half-conscious state I could understand that this sound was quite different from the earlier squeaking. I began thinking who this could be. The guests would thus keep coming all night, and I would be getting up and lighting the lamp. I was forced to light the big lamp only to see a big sparrow sitting between the coal-tar-coloured beam and the white roof."

"The whole horde of sparrows of the fields intends to enter the house."

"You don't understand anything nor do you try to. Why don't you see that she is watching her two fledg'lings without a wink of sleep all night like me? Perhaps her two offsprings are running high fever caused by their wandering on the new dews in the open. Or else, why should they sit huddled together?

They must be feeling cold. I thought she too startled, like me, by a nightmare, screaming, 'rush in; the old witch is carrying away our children. She would roast them for her sour gruel'. I understood that she, too, like me, was a miserable, hapless mother so anxious about her offsprings. She must have heard the owl hooting from the sprawling banyan tree on the bank of the tank. I was afraid I won't be able to restore the life of my children from the hands of that old witch."

"Things went so far. You were so tormented. You saw, heard, and knew everything. Yet you didn't share anything with me, even didn't make me your companion."

"Is this all? Last night I learnt a lot. Many events more real than this passed unnoticed, unheard, unknown, while we lie down like corpses. Only he who can take pains, torture his body and keep nightly vigil will see and know everything. If you lie asleep like a log of wood, this wonderful world will appear a dark world."

"Why do you aim your invective at me? What was to be had happened. Did you give the medicine or not?"

"Do you think one dose of medicine can cure a disease? My nervousness disappeared without medicine. I became very courageous this time. Two

mothers with four children together lighted the same lamps in the same temple with the same aim. I had the least doubt about the illness of her offsprings. Or else, why should their mother keep awake, why should the eardrums be beaten thin? Gradually, I felt the bird on that beam was my own sister born of my mother. As though, we, two sisters have come with our children to our father's house. Here, we'll keep company in weal and woe, and passing some days together, will return to our husband's house."

"And the medicine will lie where it is."

"Right, comfort is injurious. Security makes man irresponsible. I put out the lamp again and went off to sleep, thinking my sister would watch my children. Let me go to sleep a while, my eyelids are burning."

"Well said. Auntie will keep watch. Give medicine. Put the wet band. Measure the temperature. Call you at three."

"Why are you surprised? Trust is all. Do you think none else except the alarm clock can rouse man in time? Before this machine was invented, people used to get up in time, feel their children's pulses, grind the medicine in right proportion and administer the dose."

"Did you finally give the medicine?"

"I can't say whether the alarm of your clock rang or not. I also can't say how long I slept. I woke up again to the sound of twittering. This sound was very hoarse, harsh. Not at all sweet. Commanding voice, authoritarian. This sound threatened to be never-ending. Wave after wave of sound. Along with this, came the deafening sound of the jail bell, the Kachery bell, the Power House bell, the Saw Mill bell and many more unknown bells. Thong-thong-thong. Three. As if all the bells of the world were waiting for this command. No sooner did the dying cadences of the bells dissolve into the stillness of the air than the room echoed with the chirping, squeaking, twittering of birds. Bulbul and Jhunjhuni also got up and began calling 'Mother. Mother.' It seemed the family of sparrows took our rooms, our house under their occupation."

"I would have thought it was the work of a spirit, thought the spirit of the hanged man had haunted our house."

"Any ignoramus would have thought that. I lighted the lamp again. When I looked up, I found peeping out of the old nest the father of the fledg'lings.

There was a black stripe under its neck. Fluttering his wings, stretching his legs to and fro, he was shaking off his laziness. After his eyes were acclimatized to light, he looked up the upper storey on the beam at his Mem Sahib and then at his Bulbul and Jhunjhuni swaying in the swing. The whole house reverberated with the joyous sound of 'good morning."

"Thereafter did you see the clock and give the medicine?"

"Damn you. While all the clocks of the world struck three, would yours have tolled twelve? I didn't have to call both. I administered the dose. My hands felt they both had no temperature. They sought for food. Higher up, the two birdies separated themselves and began pecking at one another's beak. They, too, were perhaps hungry after the remission of fever. A moment later, they came close together again and dipped their beaks, eyes and heads in the feather. They no longer looked like birds. It seemed they were all creatures of the fairy world. In the morning I woke up to find none of them there. They vanished into the sky whence they had come."

"They might have flown away through the skylight. Had you called me, I would have seen them. All right. Why didn't you ask that male bird with a necktie how he had kept his wife and children outside while sleeping in the nest in a carefree and comfortable manner.

"If so, I would have roused you. Do you manage, run the family or look after the household? We all oversee, manage. You're only a pillar of strength."

"And when he reappears, show him to me."

"Damn you. You're just saying to break his nest."

"Did I see them or know them?"

"Then, will they stay in this house this year, too?"

"Wait, let me first decide whether this house belongs to them or to us."

Tr. by Pabitra Mohan Nayak

DAWN

Bibhuti Bhusan Tripathy

I seemed to be the only passenger in the air-conditioned compartment of the Express train. There might be at the most only a couple of passengers in the other parts of the carriage. I was entitled to travel by air - the expenses would be borne by my company - but I always preferred to travel by train in an air-conditioned compartment. Here, one would not be bothered by dust or smoke, and the sunlight would lie softly on the light blue double-glazed windows. One could lean against a pillow, pull a blanket over oneself, pick up a book from the table and read it through and relax. From time to time one might press the calling bell and order tea. If one felt like it, one could go down the connecting corridor to the pantry and have breakfast, lunch or dinner. One could also have one's meals in comfort on one's berth. One is absolutely free to do whatever one likes. I wonder why people give up the comforts of such a trouble-free, predictable journey and opt for expensive and hectic travel by air?

Consider how much work I managed to get done during the day. I had started writing a book two years ago, and had stopped after I was only halfway through. It was as if I had walked into a labyrinth, and was unable to find a way out. But today, in the quiet intimacy of this railway compartment, things suddenly fell neatly into place, a ray of light shone through the dark. Since nine in the morning I went on writing non-stop, as if possessed. In the middle of all this, I took my meals, paced up and down the corridor, hummed old tunes to myself. Midday gave way to mellow afternoon, and the dark descended without my noticing it. At last I stopped writing, got up and looked around. Oh, what a pure joy, how deep a feeling of contentment! I spent a long time bathing under the shower. I changed, had dinner in the dining car, and came back to my berth. It was about nine o' clock. My heart was overflowing with a bliss I had never known ever before. It seemed as if someone was gently coating my nerves with cool

sandal paste. Waves of clear blue sleep rose, swayed and surged over my consciousness.

Knock, knock, knock. A gentleman opened the door and came into the compartment. He was accompanied by the steward, and a coolie carrying a huge suitcase. He was smartly dressed, tall, well built and handsome. He shook hands with me. His warm grip made me feel that he had a strong personality. He sat himself down on the berth opposite mine, took off his coat and tie, gave me a very friendly look and said, 'we are then fellow passengers for the night. Come; let's get to know each other, for tomorrow morning we will go our separate ways. Everything about tonight will be forgotten, wiped clean. This is true of life as well. But at least this night belongs to us. So, let's celebrate it. What do you say?' He took out a long golden cigarette case from his back pocket and held it out to me. I normally don't smoke. I smoked only occasionally among my friends. Nevertheless I reluctantly picked up a cigarette from the case, not to hurt the feelings of the gentleman. He held out the cigarette lighter. I lighted my cigarette. He got up and rang the bell. He then pulled his large suitcase from under the berth and opened it. While rummaging through it he asked the steward to bring over two glasses, ice, soda and a lemon. What he had in mind was absolutely clear now. It made me apprehensive, for I never take alcohol. I pleaded, 'You have to excuse me Mr.........' He said, 'Malhotra. Mr. Malhotra.' I continued, 'Yes, you must excuse me, Mr. Malhotra. I don't drink at all.' The gentleman seemed shocked. 'Oh my God, he said, and looked up at me in utter disbelief. I don't know what passed through his mind. Then he shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Anyway'. From his suitcase he took out a very expensive bottle of foreign liquor and a sheaf of magazines. I picked up a few and browsed. These included prohibited magazines like the *Playboy*, which featured nude photographs. I put them aside after turning a few pages. The ice cubes and lemon arrived. Mr. Malhotra began drinking, pouring his drink on the ice, not mixing it with water. Smoking cigarette after cigarette, and taking sips from his glass, he went on talking about national and international affairs and his travels. The conversation grew very interesting. The range of Mr. Malhotra's experience was very wide indeed. He had made many trips abroad. Not for pleasure, but on business. It gradually became clear that the sphere of his business extended far beyond India. As I watched Mr. Malhotra drinking and listened to him,

fascinated by his strong personality and his impeccable English, memories of an evening long ago recurred to me.

I had once gone to chowringhee in Calcutta at the invitation of Ananta, a friend of mine. It was an icy cold night of Christmas. It was midnight when I followed Ananta into the bar of a posh hotel. The bar was crowded to suffocation. I had no intention of getting drunk for I had gone there only to watch, to have an experience. Leaning against the semi-circular mahogany table of the bar, and holding a wineglass full of some soft drink, I looked about me. Thank god, I was wearing tinted glasses. The excited laughter of a woman made me turn round, and I saw a half-naked foreign lady throwing herself into the arms of her boy friend. She was completely drunk. And the man whispered to his friend, 'Nothing like taking a tipsy woman to bed.' Nudging me with his elbow, Ananta drew my attention to a group of five or six gentlemen seated around a round table. The group included Indians as well as foreigners. They were all dressed in expensive clothes: they were all in excellent health, and each of them held a glass of wine or a cigar. They seemed to be deep in conversation, which was punctuated by hearty laughter, jokes, back patting, and handshakes. Sometimes their voices rose and at others they spoke softly among themselves. The waiter walked round their table replenishing their glasses. One of them took out his wallet from his back pocket and flung four or five hundred rupee notes on to the waiter's tray. Ananta went on giving me a running commentary. 'Don't you see? Each one of them is a big shot. Deals involving millions of rupees may have been struck around that table while we are watching them at this very moment. They will drink all night tonight. Some of them will have to be carried into their suites. Next morning, as soon as they come to their senses, they will again start drinking, downing peg after peg. Then they will need a woman. The things that will take place over the next two days one would not be able to put into words. This holiday over, they will go back to their respective places of work. My God. The amount of work these people can do! I myself have seen how each one of them can do with ease what ten of us will find terribly taxing. Their bodies have so much energy! Slogging for eighteen to twenty hours a day is no problem for these people. They work hard and make money with both their hands. Each one of them is a multi-millionaire. Each one is a successful man. Unlike people like you and me, they have no time to worry themselves

sick over questions of morality. They hate to sit idle, leaving everything to fate or god. These people are truly great!'

Mr. Malhotra opened the door and went out into the corridor. My eyes were drawn to a fat purse, a gold cigarette case and lighter, which lay on his berth. Mr. Malhotra, then, belonged to the class of successful men. I felt slightly uncomfortable, awkward. Mr. Malhotra was taking rather long in coming back to his berth. It was already ten O'clock; past the time I normally went to bed. I switched off the main light, turned on the low-power blue light, and lay on my berth, my eyes closed. Mr. Malhotra returned. He had put on his night suit. I did not want to continue our conversation. In no time I dropped off into deep sleep.

During the night I don't know what time it was- I woke up once. May be I was disturbed by the sound of a passing train. While trying to get back to sleep after glancing, bleary-eyed, at the window of the carriage, I saw in the faint light Mr. Malhotra seated on his berth as before. The bottle and the glass stood on the table. He held in his hands a lit cigarette. I turned over and went back to sleep.

I woke up once more in the small hours of the night. I brought out my wristwatch from under the pillow. It was twenty past four. This was the time I got up as a matter of habit. I was feeling very fresh after a good night's sleep. I sat up. A strange sight presented itself to me. In the berth opposite mine,

Mr. Malhotra remained seated in the same attitude. His bed had remained unused. He had then spent all night wide awake, drinking and smoking. He said to me, as if he could sense what was going on in my mind,' you feel surprised, don't you? But there is nothing surprising about this. I haven't had any sleep for years now. In fact, I can't get any sleep. "Thou have murdered sleep thou shall sleep no more." Mr. Malhotra smiled softly. I understood that he was not in his senses. But as if he could read my thoughts, he said, 'you think this is incoherent talk from a drunken man. 'Believe me, I am not drunk. No matter how many drinks I take, I don't get tipsy at all. Even sleeping tablets have no effect on me. I asked, 'But why? You are very rich. You enjoy excellent health. And you are a successful man. What do you lack?' Mr. Malhotra kept quiet and drank up what was left in his glass. He lit another cigarette and said in a low voice, 'you are right. I have everything - wealth, power, and prestige. But when I watched you lying

fast asleep before me, I got the feeling that I had nothing at all in life. I understood how wretchedly poor, how utterly helpless I was. How effortlessly you dropped off to sleep. And what a soothing, comforting sleep that was! I can't put in words how much I envy you." His voice grew excited. "Will you let me have one tiny bit of your sleep? I am willing to give you whatever price you ask for it. Fifty thousand? One lakh? Two? Mr. Malhotra felt embarrassed for having got carried away, and pleaded, 'for heaven's sake, don't take me for a drunkard. I am not at all drunk. What I am telling you comes straight from the heart. I have never been more serious in my life. Surely we are contemporaries. True, we belong to different professions and our lives run along different courses. But we do face problems at every step of the way. You have your share of problems, like everyone else. And yet the moment you shut your eyes, sleep came down and enveloped you in its fond embrace. And I lay here like something discarded, a sense of my worthlessness slowly burning me from within.'

Mr. Malhotra fell silent. Many questions and doubts crossed my mind. Was this all incoherent talk from a drunken man? Or, did they make sense? Maybe, in this unearthly hour a confession issued spontaneously from a bruised heart. May be, a new dawn was beginning to illuminate his world, which was filled with darkness.

The train slowed down. It was approaching the station where I was to get down. The darkness outside the glazed window was getting thinner. Dawn was whitening a clear, cloudless sky. The sun would rise shortly.

The train moved into the station. The steward had already taken my luggage to the door. I went up to Mr. Malhotra and took both his hands in mine. His hands quivered like two scared bridlings. I lovingly stroked them. It seemed as if all the love and sympathy in my heart flowed out and permeated his whole being. And I was persuaded, for some strange.reason, that Mr. Malhotra would fall asleep now, that a deep sleep would overcome him.

The whistle blew. I hurriedly extricated my hands from his and got down. On my way I looked out of the window of the taxi and felt that I had never seen a more beautiful or more radiant morning over before.

Tr. by Jatindra Kumar Nayak.

FATHER AND SON

Surendra Mohanty

The rays of the early rising sun, filtered through a tiny path atop a hillock, is faintly lighting up the dark dungeon. From above, on the king's way, is heard a clamour, the day- to-day commotion of common people.

The prisoner cast a hungry look at the passage filled with light. Like the beatific aura of the Lord Buddha, the gloom of the prison-house softly spread over the surface of the stone platform.

Hungry and worn out, the old prisoner is a bare skeleton, a decaying spectre! The once mighty chest is now caved in, covered with a growth of hair, wild and matted.

The skin of the body hangs loose and withered.

The prisoner is none else than Bimbisara, the Lord of Magadha. He is imprisoned by his son Ajatashatru.

It is Ajatashatru's vow to let Bimbisara die through slow pangs of hunger.

Weary and depressed, the tired eyes of Bimbisara begin to close. His limbs become still and immobile. Moistening his thirsty tongue on his dry lips, Bimbisara uttered, through a choked voice, a cry of suffering.

This palace was, after all, built at his command. Today it is the darkness of the same palace, where, away form public gaze, he was undergoing a relentless agony. Could this be the law of his karma, the karma of his previous births?

Once the former capital of Kushagranagar had caught fire. The price for a burnt house was the fate of exile and banishment, according to the royal edict. Strange are the ways of Fate! The palace of Bimbisara itself caught fire and Bimbisara had to embrace a voluntary imprisonment.

Bimbisara was overpowered by the beauty of the shadowy hills, fed by serpent - like streams that encircled cool forests. At his command was erected the new capital of Magadha, his new palace.

Bimbisara lifted his weary eyelids once more in order to have his last look, his eyes lifeless and still like stone.

That day, after the imprisonment of Bimbisara, her hair wild and dishevelled and eyes laden with tear, Koshala Devi had pleaded before Ajatashatru :

"My son!"

Amused, Ajatashatru replied: me, O queen of Kashi !"

"Must you feel ashamed to call me your mother!"

Ajatashatru laughed aloud. He said in a stern voice,

"I have no objection in addressing you as mother. However, tell me mother, which woman would think of killing her unborn fetus, fearing parricide? What then would be the reply of her son?"

Helpless, Koshala Devi intoned: " I have said a hundred times that what you utter is only wild rumour bereft of any substance!

Said Ajatashatru: "Can there ever be a smoke without fire? But why discuss this? Tell me, I am prepared to entertain any request barring the release of Bimbisara!"

Eyes flooded with tears. Koshala Devi said: "If the prince desires his auspicious coronation to be bathed by the blood of his father, then who can dare oppose this? But I have only one prayer. Bimbisara has taste for no other food than those prepared by this unfortunate self. I hope you will not deny me the privilege of serving him today!

Ajatashatru said: "Your boon is granted, O queen of Kashi! But after Koshala Devi's departure. Ajatashatru ordered the sentry not to allow the prisoner touch any food sent by the queen.

Now the pitcher lay empty. Lifting the empty vessel with trembling hands to his lips, Bimbisara dropped it on the floor and it broke into pieces.

The morning sun had already risen; its passage had covered a considerable distance. The faint ray of light emanating from top of the hillock had since long dissolved into darkness. Inside the dingy and fetid prison house, a cruel blackness reigned supreme.

There can be no tormentation worse than the pangs of hunger. Only the body's thirst can match this pain! Soon, there will be a respite from this as well. Then, there will be nothingness - like the Nirvana of Buddhism. The sphere of emptiness was inching closer to Bimbisara. In the vastness

of the emptiness, his gaze held the placid picture of the Buddha- lost in meditation, his eyes half - closed, radiating peace.

Bimbisara's tongue and lips cracked due to thirst. There were droplets of black blood. It is that witness that now freed his voice. Like an angry and injured child, he roared.

Tucked amidst the hillocks, there lay the meditating caves. The prince of the Shakyas, Gautama, had apparently taken Sanyasa here. This was hearsay, and Bimbisara was surprised.

It was a blue, cloudless sky that greeted Bimbisara as he came that day to the hillock for the darshan of Gautama. Serene and poised, the latter was giving a discourse before a group of mendicants. The spectacle around could only be otherworldly. There was the dance of the peacocks and the prancing of wild deer as the latter grazed on a carpet of green grass. Deeply lost in reverie, a doe gazed mesmerized at her own reflection on the crystal waters of the nearby pond.

Gautama's body had a wonderful glow; his eyes reflected the sombreness of the evening, his hands signified peace: Bimbisara asked: "What sorrow has prompted you to carry out such a terrible Sadhana?" With a faint smile, Gautama said: "Not for any sorrow O King, it is to unfathom the root cause of sorrow and to seek its removal that I carry out such arduous penance!"

Bimbisara laughed aloud: " The cause may be easy to grasp," he said, "but how can you hope to discover it in the depths of the caverns! Come to the pleasure hall of the royal palace. It is in the beaded bubbles of wine and the sound of the anklets of the dancers that you will find solace!"

Once again Bimbisara laughed aloud. Gautama's gaze had assumed the shade of the evening's sombreness. It became deep and solemn like the mute darkness of the evening.

Ah! How agonizing is the thirst - as though some one was tearing apart the windpipe of Bimbisara!

After a moment's silence, Gautam replied: "There is no end to the fire of desire O King!"

The lifeless dungeon seemingly echoed these words.

There was a change of guard in the prison and the sound of iron

chains was now audible. Like an injured wild animal, Bimbisara bit his arm. The thirst was simply unbearable.

Through his bedroom Ajatashatru cast a steady glance at the surrounding garland of hills. On the bed lay the expectant queen Bajra. A flight of birds rose into the sky and soon returned to their base.

Tired, Bajra called out, "Maharaj!" Sitting beside her, Ajatashatru stroked her forehead gently and whispered: "Tell me Bajra, what is it that troubles you?" Bajra held the hand of Ajatashatru and said: Maharaj, would it be a son or a daughter?" Ajatashatru rose from the bedside and fled to his secluded room. Bajra cried out in pain. The delivery was imminent.

Son! Son! Ajatashatru saw in his vision the dark dungeon of the palace. His feet and hands bound by fetters, a hungry Bimbisara cries in starvation.

Cruel is the prophecy of the future: Bajra's first-born son would slay his father. Ajatashatru's face turned grim. Would he imprison the expectant Bajra? Or would he fling the newborn baby into the dark well? Not a big problem surely for Ajatashatru to resolve. The past and present at one go!

The past is already behind him in prison, and the future? Well thank God; both past and future have simply no existence now!

From inside is heard the cry of Bajra - the heart-rending cry of birth pangs. Churning and tearing apart its creator and her womb, the unborn child is seeking self-expression!

There was a steady flow of celebrations the other day. Bimbisara had ordained thus. Ajatashatru recalled the story of his birth he had heard years back from the mid-wife.

By now, every nook and corner of the palace echoed the pain of Bajra. How cruel is the nature of creation! The creator himself has no independence and must ask for the former's kindness. This was the reality, ever present, inimitable! At the thought of his imminent fatherhood, Ajatashatru's heart was overflown with excitement.

Hearing the foot' steps of some one in the secluded chamber, Ajatashatru now looked back.

"What tidings do you carry, Chanda? Asked Ajatashatru the messenger. Replied Chanda: "Your Highness, we have followed the royal

command and have not given a drop of water to the prisoner for the last three days. It's the fourth day today!"

The expression on Ajatashatru's face turned grim. "And then?" he asked Chanda.

"Initially was heard the cry: O my son, O my kingdom!" replied Chanda. From the queen's palace was heard the blowing of the conch and other auspicious sound. Bajra's cry had ceased since quite some time. Agitated, Basumati, the midwife came running: "Good news O Maharaj, "she exclaimed: " The queen has delivered a son!" Kindly instruct the minister to order for celebrations in the Kingdom!"

"Yes, indeed, we await your command!" said Chanda.

Ajatashatru alternated his glance between Basumati and Chanda and then ran out in a delirium. Like a deranged person, he crossed flights of steps and rows of rooms, halting at the entrance to the prison cell. The sentry offered his greetings.

"Open the door!" commanded Ajatashatru. The iron gates screeched hideously and opened. Inside, an impenetrable darkness ! Crossing a series of steps, covered in gloom, Ajatashatru ran into the cell.

"O father, I have finally understood the meaning of fatherhood!"

The creator is forever kind and compassionate like an innocent child. Ajatashatru would hide his face in the lap of Bimbisara and ask his forgiveness, he decided.

Alas! Ajatashatru was too late. The lifeless, worn-out body of Bimbisara lay immobile upon the stony surface. Like an arrowpierced animal, hungry and wild, the victim had bitten one of his arms at the end of his life. Blood had trickled down his wound and had coagulated.

From inside the palace, there emanated the auspicious blowing of the conch announcing the arrival of the new 'born baby.

Tr. by Sachidananda Mohanty

LOVE, FEAR AND MARIGOLD FLOWERS

Kishori Charan Das

Gagan Babu, a senior civil servant, now retired was not unaware of a certain fact about himself. That he was a timid person. But he did not make much of the fact till all the hair on his head had turned grey. It was there that he decided on a fine morning when he was reading the newspaper, to do something about it. It was high time to have it erased, an unlovely spot in an image that could be called radiant. More so when it had acquired a newer glow with the crown of grey hair he had come to acquire in his later life. It was a personality that carried the reputation of a long and distinguished service under the Government, a smiling face, and an affable nature which was generous to a fault. No wonder, he told himself, that he was hard put to manage these days, invitations galore to preside over cultural conferences, inaugurate Art exhibitions, unveil statues of our great men of the past, etc.

Yet a stupid little incident of his childhood had clung to his memory. He had committed a theft. Had removed by stealth, a smart-looking fountain pen that belonged to his elder brother. But having done it he did not keep quiet like a sensible thief, hoping he would enjoy the fruits of a dare devil impulse, after the hue and cry had died down. Nor did he opt for one of the two honourable courses of action open to him - namely, to tell them that he did it for a lark or to say he was sorry to have done such a thing, and it won't happen again. Instead he put it back, no less stealthily, at the same place, after a couple of days. That was neither here nor there, but sheer stupidity. Stupidity that derives from fear. Gagan Babu would dismiss the thought by saying that it was a piece of childishness and he was no more than a child then. But the thought kept on recurring.

Same with matters concerning love and sex in his later years. Well, he did visit some prostitutes, once or twice when he was young. In order to brag about to his friends and let them know that he was no sissy. It was not an entirely unusual thing that one happens to do in his callow youth. So he could have mentioned it to his wife, laughingly now that he had grown in

years and good sense. But he did not do so, why? Gagan Babu did not have an easy answer to that.

Coming to liaisons, which were akin to love, sex or no sex, but were outside marriage, Gagan Babu felt a little more troubled about them understandably. I could have surely explained them away to my dear wife, he thought, but why didn't I do it? One and half of the tally (one person did not belong to the opposite sex, but was trying hard to join in) were pre-marital, whereas the rest were extra marital. Now, love by itself is a noble sentiment. So what was wrong in telling my wife, without causing harm to anybody, that it had happened thus and thus in my relations with so and so? Was she not sensible enough to take it in the proper spirit? On the other hand, if I did consider it as wrong, I could surely have confessed the wrongdoing to her, and she would have forgiven me, knowing how these things actually, were. But I did neither. Indeed it would appear as if you could not expect any thing better from a timid person, in the background of what he did with the stealing of a fountain pen when he was a boy. Never mind if he has grown in years and wisdom by now. But has he really?

Forget the pre-marital. Let's do an honest analysis of the three extramarital ones-Gagan Babu embarked on an exercise today rather determinedly, to tell himself that he could well have confided in his wife about each one of them, and it could do nobody no harm. Impelled, apparently, by the newspaper column that had come to his notice. Now, take Jayanti to start with. She was the wife of a dear friend, and I did regard her with a certain affection and admiration. Tender sentiments which I could not help conveying to her with a kiss or two. No more than that. So why couldn't I tell about it to my wife, who knows me well enough, the unique range and depth of my sentiments if not to my friend? Then there was this Purnima Das, an unmarried young woman who taught literature in a college. The feelings of love I bore towards her (Yes, I don't mind calling it love) carried an aesthetic rather spiritual, quality about it, as we were exchanging poems written by us. Heartfelt expressions that spoke of love, human and divine, in beautiful settings of Nature, which made us feel so good and happy. May be the happiness, extraordinary, played some tricks with us that led to sex. But didn't we both realize that the act was irrelevant and uncalled for, in the context of the abiding relationship that had developed between us, thanks to the Muses? Anyway she was transferred to another

town, and we have not heard from each other since. Maybe she got married soon after, and has ceased to write poetry. Nor have I for that matter. But I cannot possibly deny the experience. And why should I? Finally there was Satyabati Mehta, a junior colleague, and a middle-aged lady. I was privileged at one time to write a confidential character report on her work and conduct. Well, I was indeed fond of her, including her work and conduct. But there was no question, mind you, of any physical relations between us. Not even a brotherly kiss. Maybe I had patted her on the back or held on to ner hand for an extra few seconds by way of encouragement, but that cannot surely be faulted, if you are genuinely fond of a colleague. She was also a lady, yes, but so what ? No, what troubled me for sometime was the fact that she had got an out-of turn promotion because of me. Thanks to a glowing report I gave on her work and conduct, with a specific recommendation that she deserved such a promotion. Was it an over statement? In other words was it an act of favouritism caused by excessive fondness for her? I must admit that when I made the recommendation I felt like having enlarged the area of contact between us - beyond patting her on the back or holding her hand - and that was an experience, but those were fanciful feelings that do not deserve serious consideration. Yet the fact remains that I did not make it known to my wife that there was anything in the nature of fondness between us. Wasn't it silly on my part?

Thus did Gagan Babu analyse those extramarital relationships to conclude that they were no affairs really, and no moral wrong should be read into them. He was different, basically, from many others who had cheated on their wives, but didn't bother about it. So he should be the last person to join their ranks by withholding the information from his spouse. No sir, it shall not be so, he repeated to himself. He did not claim to be a perfect husband. And in any case the moon was a moon for all that, the poetic blemish of a dark spot notwithstanding.

Thus he decided that today he would openly acknowledge a love he had experienced in his life. One that was both premarital and extramarital, and yet was so pure and ethereal that it had escaped his calculations. It'll be my first essay in fearlessness. And you could not ask for a better beginning.

For I'II go to Satichaura* today. It says here in the engagement column of the paper that homage will be offered today by friends and relations to the memory of a lady at her Samadhi** in the Satichaura, on the occasion of her seventeenth death anniversary.

I'II also pay my homage to her. I'II place flowers on her Samadhi and remember her, with folded hands and bated breath. Because I had loved her.

I had loved Dr. Kadambini Parida.

I had loved Kadambini.

I had loved Bini, daughter of one of my *mousas*

I'II acknowledge the truth of my feelings towards her before the entire world, as I pay my homage to her in broad daylight. And to start with, I'II announce my intentions to my wife, o.k. ?

He did so, for a fact. Declared to his wife that he would be going today to Satichaura. And take some marigold flowers from the garden, to place on the Samadhi of someone. Death anniversary today, as it says in the paper.

" Really ?" his wife asked, somewhat surprised " who was the gentleman ?"

" No gentleman, it is a lady," Gagan Babu said in a solemn tone, "Dr. Kadambini Parida."

"How did you know her? She could not have been your classmate. She was two classes senior to me, as far as I remember, in the High School. Or was she your girl-friend?" There was a knowing smile on her lips.

But Gagan Babu did not rise to the bait. He was not going to be engaged in a light-hearted banter. He remained grave and solemn, as he replied to her" Not a girl friend, in the ordinary sense of the term. I had loved her."

"I see, " said the wife in a similar vein. But it seemed to Gagan Babu that she was feigning seriousness, while she found it rather amusing. It's a pity, he said inwardly. Why should 'love' sound amusing in the mouth of an old man? Is love just a physical phenomenon and no more? That apart, wasn't this old man of yours a young fellow at one time? And don't I know, my dear wife, how you would have reacted to my confessions in the area

of love, flushed face and all, and yet trying to be brave about it, if I had said this to you some ten to fifteen years back?

But wait, he warned her, this is just the beginning. The history sheet of my loves will be in your hands in no time. I will tell you everything, in every relevant detail. Jayanti, Purnima, Satyabati, and all. No Plea in self-defense, nor shall I ask for your forgiveness. For that was indeed what had happened to me, each a different note in the sa-re-ga-ma of love, and though it was irregular for a married person to have enjoyed the music, I have no reason to feel ashamed about it.

I would have been particularly happy to tell you more about this one, which was apparently one-sided and silent, but for your benign indifference. That I may not have touched her body, but for your benign indifference. That I may not have touched her body, but I had loved true and proper. My heart would start pounding whenever I met her. And not only when I was young, but in my later life too, and after I had married. No words would issue from my lips to start with, but when they did it would be dime to a dozen. Her upstanding bosom, the radiance in her large eyes and the smile on her rounded goddess like face that spelt peace and benediction, would take my breath away. So much so that I failed with a ready and suitable response to even a casual enquiry from her. "How are you, Gagan Babu ?" Now, what else could it be but love, this unusual state of mind at the sight of a woman?

There were some who called her Gajagamini, i.e. walking like an elephant, in a mock-poetic sense referring to the large dimensions of her body. Some even said, I don't know why, she had a limping gait. But I found no such shortcoming in her. Could this also not be considered as a certain' blindness' that goes with love?

She had achieved quite some reputation, as a doctor. But unfortunately she died an untimely death. I was a long distance away at that time and so I could not have a last look at her. Those large eyes would then be lying closed, with no promise of opening up ever again. Gagan Babu felt like having a pain in his heart, as he recalled those moments he was not favoured with. And that added urgency to the task in hand. First and foremost the marigold flowers in full bloom, fresh and large and golden

- yellow, the speciality of my garden. I shall take at least twenty of them, place them at her feet, and then spread them generously around the Samadhi.

I know she was cremated in the Satichaura, and it is there that a Samadhi had been erected to her memory. I know where it is, somewhere on the western side. I had been there once, some three years back, on the death anniversary of my *mousa*, the late Dibakar Das Patnaik, M.A.B L reputed District Magistrate and Collector (all this was inscribed on the inset marble slate). It was an obligatory trip and there, when I was loitering about in the grounds, I noticed Kadambini's Samadhi At a certain distance from the area crowded by well-known leaders freedom fighters, writers, etc. As if she was sulking, nursing a grievance against the good God. Did you have to take me away, so soon as that? Don't you think I could also have prided myself on achievements, no less than theirs, if I had lived longer? I would surely have served many more patients, and have gladdened the hearts of some non-patients too, with a smiling and benevolent query about their welfare. But never mind, Bini, you can smile now. See how a silent lover has come to see you and pay his homage, after all these years. And openly acknowledge the love he bears towards you. So don't you see how great you are, with the charm of a personality that defies death? Gagan Babu hastened with his preparations for the destination, Satichaura.

But he had hardly begun plucking the marigold flowers when he came to a halt. For a new angle of thought came to his mind. Look, he told himself, why should I leave so early in the day? Her relations would be there now. She had not married till her death, as far as I know, So a host of relations, near and distant, would be vying with each other, to make it known how close they were to the dear departed. But it goes without saying that I don't belong to that crowd. The tone and tenor of my closeness to her was entirely different.

So he postponed his project till the afternoon, and informed his wife accordingly. But while endorsing his decision she advanced a reason unnecessarily that irked Gagan Babu. "Yes, you better go there in the afternoon ". She said, "when the sun comes down a bit". What a thing to say! " - Gagan Babu scoffed at her inwardly,

"As if wishes of the heart can he put off by things like ordinary heat and cold! "

Anyway the sun was well down the meridian by the time he reached Satichaura. Gagan Babu dismissed the rickshaw. This was no ritual to be performed somehow or other as in the inaugural or unveiling ceremonies. Oh no! This will take time, quite some time. Gagan Babu advanced towards the gate in slow unhurried steps.

But when he reached the gate with a wicker-basket of marigold flowers in his hands, an unusual scene confronted him. There were hardly any people around, but quite a few cows could be seen inside the crematorium, some of whom had gathered at the gate, pushing it listlessly from time to time. As though they were bored with the proceedings inside, and would be happy to come out.

What now?

Gagan Babu was peeved at the question raised in his mind. Stupid! was every new circumstance to be considered as a problem that called for a solution? Or do you want to prove it to yourself that fear of some kind or other shall ever and always be your stock-in-trade? Get going, Gagan Babu, and let the blessed cows tend for themselves. They'll surely make way, for you, and then you will proceed to the hallowed spot, and then the marigolds.

But even as he resolved thus and started moving up there was a pause that intervened between resolution and action, a blank moment of irresolution true of all thinking men. And it was within this breather of a pause that a certain gentleman appeared from nowhere and shouted from behind.

" Look, Sir, what are you doing? The cows will get away, don't you see?"

Gagan Babu turned around to look upon a familiar face grinning at him. Familiar yes, but it took him sometime to recognise him. Not unusual these days with his advancing years, and he didn't like it. The man was Bishnu Mishra, advocate. Not a friend but presumed to be one, whenever they happened to meet. About the same age may be, but he was no classmate - was he? But he talked in a manner that suggested he had a claim to

intimacy. Now he briefed Gagan Babu on the situation, as an able advocate, and a friend no less.

"Don't you know", he said, "why they have been left here by their owners? Because that saves them the bother of looking after them. So won't they curse you if you let them loose"? The grin had widened.

"Come, there is nothing to be afraid of", added the speaker extending a hand towards Gagan Babu, who tried to make it known with a sullen face (but no more) that he was not amused. Nevertheless the helping hand took him past the gate, while pushing the cows back and closing the gate promptly, in a dexterous move that deserved praise.

It was then that Bishnu Babu noticed the little basket of flowers in his hands, and asked," Are the flowers for the Samadhi of somebody?"

"Yes", was the monosyllabic answer. Did he have to ask such a silly question ? Why else does one bring flowers to a place like this?

However they were the only two persons then, within the confines of the crematorium, barring the cows. Up above was the sky of a dull afternoon, and below the silent Samadhis of varying shapes and sizes erected to honour the dead. So how could you avoid a bit of conversation? Secondly, mused Gagan Babu, there was nothing secret about his mission, and so there was no reason this man should not know about it. He was thus impelled in a little while, to expand on his answer, and said,

"I had come to place flowers on the Samadhi of Dr. Kadambini.

It is her death anniversary today. What about you?"

"Well, I come here from time to time. They all deserve my respect and good wishes, all these silent beings. I say hello to them, and get back after some time. Have you bought these beautiful flowers from the florist, or they are from your garden?"

"From my own garden", said Gagan Babu, with a touch of pride in his voice" May I give you some?"

"No, thanks".

Very well. I am not trying to share my flowers with you. They are my flowers, anyway, and are meant for Kadambini. But, how come, you were not curious enough to ask me why I should be remembering her, today with flowers .It was not too difficult for you to guess that she would

not ordinarily be a relation of mine, as she was a Parida, and I am a Das Patnaik. So what am I to her? If you had asked me it wouldn't have taken me more than a second to tell you that I had loved her. Having said so to my dear wife, there is no reason why I couldn't tell it to an ordinary outsider like you. Anyway, I couldn't care less.

A couple of cows were still hovering about near the gate. Hoping, perhaps, that some kind fellow might turn up to open it wide and help them escape. But most others were reconciled to their fate, and were going through the motions of grazing, even if they had to give up the exercise from time to time, rebuffed by the increasingly gray and stubbly patches of grass. Bishnu Babu was not to be seen. And stray clouds had appeared in the sky with a promise of cool shadows, as it were, over the ensuing proceedings of love.

Gagan Babu reached the Samadhi, put the basket down, and stood silently for two minutes, eyes closed, facing the inscription that carried the relevant information about the deceased. And then he spoke to her silently - Bini, I remember you today. I love you. May your soul rest in eternal peace.

Then he brought out the flowers form the basket one by one, and started arranging them neatly all around the Samadhi on the cement floor.

"Good! " he said as he kept looking at his handiwork. "My wishes stand fulfilled."

It was time to go back. But it seemed to Gagan Babu that the proceedings were not complete yet. He had spoken the heart-felt words, for sure, and Bini must have heard them. But Bini was still and silent. Was there none in the living world who could have provided him with the responding, barring the stupid wandering cows?

"Well, there is one at least. This Bishnu Mishra. By no means the ideal fellow to share your sentiments with. But never the less.

So Gagan Babu wanted to seek him out, his companion of the afternoon. The silent words of my love which were expressed by me a minute ago, would now be reverberating, he imagined in the nooks and crannies of the crematorium. He did not have to speak them out again for the benefit of this fellow. But he might as well say a few things and in a certain manner which would hit the target. The man couldn't be that insensitive, he hoped.

It didn't take him long to find Bishnu Babu, leaning against a Samadhi, and seemingly relaxed. He told him that he had finished the work he had come in for. And added that though Kadambini was no relation of his, in the ordinary sense of the term, she was indeed more than that. More than a mere relation or a casual friend. Now he should understand what I mean unless he is a dolt." See there", he pointed towards the Samadhi bedecked with flowers, which he had left a few minutes back.

"Yes, I have seen", Said Bishnu Babu,

But Gagan Babu could not see for himself whatever he had wanted the other man to see. So he rushed over there leaving Bishnu Babu behind, staring at him. This is surely the same Samadhi. Isn't it? The tablet clearly says that Doctor Kadambini Parida, born on such and such date, left the mortal world on such and such date, leaving her numerous friends and relations in a vale of tears etc. But where are the flowers? He didn't find any, and rubbed his eyes, so to say, in disbelief.

But the mystery was solved in a moment, when Gagan Babu went round to the backside of the Samadhi. There he saw it with his own eyes how the remaining one or two flowers were being gobbled up by a cow, calmly moving away at his approach, wagging its tail.

The damned cow had devoured it all, leaving not a trace behind!

Bishnu Babu had reached the spot by that time. Gagan Babu gave him a stupefied look. And said," It was all here, you know, beautifully arranged in a neat row with a Swastika at the centre of the front - line but it is all gone. A cow has eaten it up. Every little bit. I never thought the animal could be that voracious."

"They are eat-all, my dear Sir, they eat all and everything", said Bishnu Babu, shaking his head in a gesture of sympathy.

Gagan Babu was too stunned to say anything more. He sat down on the grass, and kept sitting. He felt he had not been beaten so badly ever before in his life. He failed even to bid Bishnu Babu a proper good-bye, when he left the scene.

There was still some time to go for the evening to set in. But it was growing dark, because of the gathering clouds. There was none around him now, except for the dead and silent fellow-beings, and the dumb cows. Did I hear the ripples of the Kathjori river? Rubbish! The river is not that near. Also there would be hardly any water in there, now, to cause any sort

of ripple. Did I hear a child cry? No, it is all an illusion Gagan Babu. Don't hide yourself. Better absorb it all the sadness and the void and the peace of an evening that has been offered to you.

Minutes passed, till it seemed to Gagan Babu that he was indeed at peace. For it had all been wiped off, thanks to the master eraser of them all? By the moving finger that writes, and deletes it too as it moves on. Not merely the marigold flowers but all the rest. All that is human - things and thoughts, agonies and ecstasies, Fears too, And love, no less, Love of all kinds, noble, banal or bestial.

But why should it make me sad, like a Buddha, to say that life is nothing but sorrow?

I'll go home now, to my wife. I'll tell her everything, from the beginning to the end. Right up to the absurd and ridiculous incident that happened to me today. And then we will laugh it off, like having enjoyed the show, together.

I am sure she will join me. She is my life-partner, isn't she? She is not just another woman in my life. For then there will be this question of how best I love her, compared to others. How more pure or less polluted. Damn it! It is all a mighty and beautiful lie. Trust the good old cow, poised to devour it all.

We will smile and laugh together at the antics of the cow. And shall enjoy life together.

There was a determined smile on the lips of Gagan Babu as he emerged from the Satichaura. Determined, as it were, to empower another to join him in his bid to happiness. Another who really mattered.

Tr. by the author

RAJAJOGA

Mahapatra Nilamani Sahu

That day Baidharbabu returned from office around five. He was delayed by half an hour because by the time he got a total of three hundred and ten rupees from the cashier - one hundred and eighty rupees towards one year's increment pay and a sum of one hundred thirty for extra duty, it was nearly five. Mercifully it was the fifteenth day of the month. Because, a queue formed itself near the cashier three days before the first of a month and lasted till the seventh day. And one had to be in the queue for one to two hours even for a fiver. For someone like Baidharbabu who was one of the low-paid junior employees getting three hundred and ten rupees at one go was akin to a dream of hitting a one-lakh jackpot . Baidharbabu felt within himself a vast lot of joy, contentment, satisfaction and gratitude. Moreover, his superior officer had flashed a rare smile in the course of the day. He also got the news that the marriage proposal of his eldest daughter with Janardan Chaudhury's eldest son Chandrakant Chaudhury, set in motion by Radheshyambabu acting as go-between, was all but finalised. The day was auspicious. Whatever the weekly horoscope had mentioned for this Saturday had come about. The predictions were accurate.

- True, it is the planetary position which runs this world. Last month's predictions mentioned *ghatayoga*. True to it, he cut his fingers in a used blade while sharpening his younger son's pencil. But *The Astrological Magazine* has predicted an excellent month this time. All the good planets have combined. It could be *rajajoga* this time. Very true.

Baidharbabu went to a nearby shop and got both the wheels of his bicycle pumped hard. He then proceeded to the Madras Hotel and ordered a dosa, a halua and a glassful of coffee. Contented and proud, he mused - Good, I ate. I have earned the money. It is no one's charity. It is my money and I depend on no one.

After this imaginary address to his ever-nagging wife he went to the paan shop nearby. He bought for himself two paans laced with 120 number

Babapati and topped it off with a cigarette. Releasing a mouthful of smoke he continued his imaginary address to his wife - Good that I chewed paan purchased from the bazaar and smoked too. I am not smoking courtesy my lousy in-laws. While at it he felt the pressing call of nature. This too he welcomed. His house was close by. After reaching house he would work his mouth in gudakhu and comfortably answer the call of nature. In fact, he would enjoy defecation. Thereafter he would have a light snack of suji or roti. It would be followed by tea. Then he would plant himself in an easy chair in the little garden and leaf through *The Illustrated Weekly* ordered by his son and daughter. Maybe, he would horse around and play the grandfather to his eldest niece's three-year old daughter. For her he had purchased some chocolates. Baidharbabu thought - Good that I bought some. I am not treating my granddaughter to chocolates on any damned in-law's bounty.

Thereafter he got on to the seat of the bicycle and looked into his shirt pocket to check its contents. - Yes, the money was safe. No one had picked his pocket at the paan shop. At this point he remembered Jilly's mother, his ever-nagging wife. Suddenly, his mind was flooded with a sense of gratitude and desire. - Poor girl. she would be definitely overjoyed at the sight of so much money. She is unfortunate. She has to keep such a big family going from morning to midnight with so much sweat and effort. With so little food or rest. How is she to blame? It is true she gets irritated when she discovers even a small amount spent on frivolities. But then she is never put off if her husband spends a little extra on his food and dress. Fact is, she is saving money for the marriage of her two daughters. Collecting jewellery and other things. Like the thrifty squirrel and the domestic sparrow she is putting together odds and ends through her little purchases. Carefully keeping everything for the future. Alas! She is singularly unfortunate in having a good-for-nothing husband like me.

Baidharbabu felt sorry for his wife. His eyes moistened. In a surge of emotion he imagined himself kissing his gaunt, ailing wife all over her body. He decided he would buy some *malli* and *baula* flowers for her. Jilly's mother always had an obsession with flowers. Cherished flowers more than ornaments. Baidharbabu bought two *malas* and relapsed into a reverie. - Would put the flowers in her hair and kiss her in front of the children. Just as it were to tell them, "Look, children! No one is dearer to

me than your mother . She is everything in my life. I am fortunate to have her. She has given me gems like you." - This is no exaggeration. Her children are so good. The eldest daughter is an epitome of beauty and virtue. The younger daughter and the elder son have bagged scholarships. And it seems the younger son would beat them all.

Forgetting everything Baidharbabu got absorbed in his love for his wife and went on musing - A blessed life and a beautiful universe ! There is nothing amiss here - no sorrow. Oh God! I don't need anything more. I never wanted to be big in life. Nor do I want it now. Do protect my children. Lead them on with a benign destiny. Let them grow up healthy whether they eat plain vegetable or rich pulao. Let them not extort money nor inflict punishment. Never should they snatch anything from anyone. If greatness comes their way allow them to do good in this world. In case their lot is ordinary let them not harm anyone and try instead to serve this world. Lord! One last prayer - before we die grant me and Jilly's mother a holy vision and a place together at your feet afterwards. Baidharbabu's eyes were lit up with a sense of devotion, contentment, peace, gratefulness and generosity. He looked all around and prayed fervently. - Oh God! Keep all in happiness!

Meanwhile the bicycle was approaching his house. The weather was perfect. It had rained the day before. And on that day, in the poet's words, "Pieces of white clouds float in the sky / Like vessels afloat on the blue seas." The southerly breeze blew gently. The majesty of flowers in different gardens had lent its intoxicating charm to the atmosphere. They would be enacting Ramlila in their neighbourhood in the evening. Pandit Sadasiba Bahinipati would recite and explain *Tulasi Ramayana*. Oh, what a lovely, melodious voice combined with a technique of touching commentary. The academic Hrudananda Rai would lecture on the character of Sri Rama. He commands such learned interpretation and spiritual insight. His general demeanour likewise is so serene and matchless. One is reminded of Bharata, Lord Rama's younger brother.

Baidharbabu thought - I shall have food early and reach Maruti Mandap in the company of Jilly's mother to savour in the nectar of Maryada Purushottama Lord Rama's life. How charming is the complexion of Sri Rama, son of King Dasaratha, Lord of Sita and the scion of Raghukula. What holiness! How rare is his filial love, affection for wife and commitment

to subjects and allies. Him, with His body aglow like tender blades of grass and the fresh lotus and the eyes like *palasa*. The divine wielder of bows and arrows. What exemplary submission to Lord Rama embodied in Sri Hanuman! And the unflagging devotion of Sugreeba and the Shabararaja. Of brothers Laxmana and Bharata. Let me humble myself before these noble characters. Oh Lord and Master! Allow me to die listening to the saga of these immortal characters.

Baidharbabu's mind then was seized with concern for his brothers. His elder brother was a teacher in the village. He was imprisoned during the 1942 Quit India movement. He still wore khadi and practised weaving. Had he joined politics he would have been a minister. But he chose to continue as a teacher. He was a pure soul. Baidharbabu worshipped him like a god. He owed him his education and the present position in life. Younger brother had opened a small grocery store in the village. Him he loved very much. Baidharbabu thought that he would ask his niece to carry a quality khadi shirt for his elder brother. There was a discount of 20% on khadi garments.

The rumination continued - I have everything and reached the end of my desires. Hereafter I depend on God's grace. May all be well in this universe!

In this state Baidharbabu alighted from the bicycle, opened the gate and entered the house. He was greeted immediately by the children. Eldest niece handed over her three-year old daughter and took away the shopping bag. It contained mangoes,bananas and rohu fish wrapped in shiny paper. His niece loved fish.

Baidharbabu gently stroked his granddaughter's cheeks and exclaimed playfully - Hey sister-in-law ! I am going to marry you today. Wait till I complete this trip to the toilet. He then went straight to Jilly's mother. She was in the kitchen giving finishing touches to a dish of *dahibara*. Holding all the money in one hand and the flowers in the other, he stood as if he were paying obeisance to a deity. Jilly's mother pretended to be angry - Aren't you ashamed of such untimely pranks in old age? Go, give it to your granddaughter. Baidharbabu planted a kiss on the sweaty cheeks and holding her chin started dancing wildly. He sang :

You indeed are my granddaughter
My love for you is forever and ever!

Jilly's mother interrupted - Enough. Go and wash. I'll serve you *dahibara*. Baidharbabu replied - I have stuffed myself full with tiffin at Madras Hotel. Jilly's mother mimicked her husband's boast - Oh! Why not? We've got all this money. - All right. First, give me my four hundred rupees which you had borrowed at the time of your niece's marriage.

Baidharbabu adopted the tone of a young lover - Dear, I offer you my life.- Listen! We'll go to Maruti Mandap to see Ramlila. Pandit Sadasiba Bahinipati and the learned Hrudananda Rai would discuss *Tulasi Ramayana*. The Ramlila party from Tulasipur would stage "Rama's Exile" and "Bharata's Union". Jilly's mother was delighted at the prospect of Ramlila. She forgot everything and echoed her husband - Of course! Finish everything quickly. My cooking is almost over. Only dal is left. Lucy and Nini are here. They would take care.

So Baidharbabu prepared himself for a trip to the toilet . But lo and behold!, there was no gudakhu. Savouring Akbari Gudakhu for a quarter of an hour after his return from the office and before his regulation visit to the latrine was a luxury he could ill afford to miss. He had no other bad habits. Baidharbabu's sweet temper was jolted. With mounting irritation he called out to his eldest son - Mantubabu! Haven't you forgotten to fetch gudakhu ? Eldest son trotted out an excuse regarding a match in the college.... Finally Jilly's mother suggested that her husband should fetch a little of the stuff from the nearby chowk without wasting any time.

Baidharbabu thought - The precious exhilarating ecstasy of the present would be lost in the unattainability of gudakhu. Horseplay with granddaughter, flirtation with wife and the proposed Ramlila visit would all come to naught. The additional income of three hundred and ten rupees would also appear to be pointless.

He donned a shirt over the lungi immediately and repaired to the chowk. The chowk was only three hundred yards from the house. He bought gudakhu and was returning when he heard a great din and bustle. He stopped and listened. Might be a marriage procession, he thought. The noise was coming from an adjacent street. There was a great rush of people in that direction. Baidharbabu stopped many persons to ascertain the nature of the event but every single one of them slipped past in a tearing hurry. This whetted his curiosity. He too quickened his steps. He had taken only a few steps when the procession emerged from the street and came

his way. Right in front was a gorgeous elephant. The bells round its neck tinkled. Its body was draped in precious jewellery and expensive muslin. Strings of pearls and diamonds bedecked the trunk. The forehead bore evidence of intricate etchings and decorative patterns. Right in the middle was a prominent line of *sindoor*. On its back was mounted an exquisite platform with cushioned seat. Three messengers clad in expensive attire - one in front and one each on both sides -accompanied it. The mahout wore lucknowi chickon and a turban with zari work. A posse of horsemen brought up the rear. The elephant was advancing in regal splendour carrying a big pitcher in its trunk. Baidharbabu paid the customary respect to the elephant and inferred that the procession must be the work of Sri Gajapati to mark some festive occasion of Lord Jagannath. But wait - what now? -what an absurd turn! The elephant sauntered straight towards him and poured the pitcherful of water on him. Baidharbabu got soaking wet and started laughing. The onlookers too clapped and produced peals of laughter. Finding himself the source of mirth for so many people Baidharbabu did a small jig out of sheer joy.

But soon after something extraordinary happened. The entire procession stopped there. The drummers drummed hysterically accompanied by wild dancing. The atmosphere reverberated with the mingled sound of pipes, trumpets and clarions. The drum and the bugle sounded to a feverish pitch. Approximately a hundred powerful crackers went off simultaneously. Baidharbabu was taken aback and he started beating a retreat. But in no time he was mobbed by some people and found himself under a heap of garlands. All of a sudden the priests accompanying the elephant started chanting vedic hymns in a loud voice signaling the beginning of some auspicious ritual. Conches blew in unison. The elephant bent its rear legs and lay prostrate on the ground. And some persons who looked like ministers, generals and royal guards lifted Baidharbabu bodily and seated him on the resplendent platform atop the elephant's back.

Baidharbabu was struck dumb. Words failed him. Still he joined his hands imploringly and managed to stammer out - Sirs! Huzoors ! Am I to blame? My name is Baidhar Das. I am a senior assistant in the education department. I lead an innocent, honest life. To the best of my knowledge I have hurt no one. My wife and children are utterly harmless. They would be shattered. - I came to buy gudakhu. Please. Please let me go. Oh! Oh my God!

The Prime Minister carried himself with admirable humility. The Commander-in-Chief did an impressive salute with his sword. And the Chief Priest anointed Baidharbabu with consecrated items. They said-Your majesty! There is a kingdom named Ajagratapura* at a distance of a hundred jojanas from here. The king in that country died issueless. In the event, the law of the kingdom lays down that whoever is selected by the elephant to receive the contents of the golden pitcher shall be the king. We roamed all over provinces like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Manipur, Nagaland, Assam and West Bengal The blisters in the feet of the elephant attest to our staggering efforts. We are all exhausted and giddy. God be praised! Our search bore fruit in the land of Kalinga. According to legends, Kalinga Gajapati's ninth ancestor, King Indradyumna II, had kidnapped the princess of our kingdom with the connivance of the city gardener's wife. That was the beginning of our blood relationship with this country. Moreover, this is the land of Lord Jagannath. We beseech you, sir, to be the potentate of Ajagratapura and bestow on us a parental care. We would be your loyal followers. It may be mentioned that the subjects of Ajagratapura are innocent, tolerant and peace-loving by nature. It is a place untouched by the ravages of famine, flood or earthquake. There are no Hindu-Muslim riots. Naxalites are unheard of. Since there are no schools or colleges children and adolescents are most naturally grown - like white water-lilies in a pond. The subjects lead singularly eventless lives. Greedy capitalists are conspicuously absent and so is theft. The women are beautiful and men gracious. The lands are fertile and yield copious produce four times a year. There are precious mineral deposits. Your majesty would come to know about it all. We ask you not to hesitate anymore Rise O mahout! Goad the elephant. Musicians, play. Attendants! recommence the firework.

Baidharbabu felt faint listening to all this. It was as if Yama's messengers had come to take him away to the other world. In the space of a moment he remembered everything - Jilly's mother, his brothers, children, granddaughter, three-hundred-and-ten-rupees, Ramlila and *dahibara*..... Next moment he called out to his wife in a heart-rending voice and sank unconscious upon the dazzling platform. Meanwhile, the small packet of Akbari Gudakhu slipped out of his hand.

* * * * * *

Eight days after. Ajagratapura geared itself for the coronation of its

new king. Festoons and *purnakumbhas* adorned each doorway. Flags fluttered all over the city. Different musical instruments filled the air with sweet tunes. The atmosphere was redolent with the fragrance of incense and flowers. The citizens felt a sense of great thrill and excitement.

But then Baidharbabu sat mute on the throne. He remained unconscious for three days following the emptying of the golden pitcher by the elephant. True, he got back consciousness after the royal physician began treatment. But his vocal chords were yet to be activated. So he continued to be in a state of speech disorder. The royal physician and others were trying their best to restore the arrested speech. Surrounding the king were seen courtiers and chiefs, pundits and brahmins, accountants and commanders, scribes and singers, followers and flatterers. Some were seated and others were kept standing. The priests chanted vedic hymns and sang out the inaugural verses. They began by pouring a pitcherful of water on the king. Simultaneously the Commander-in-chief took his sword out of its sheath, marched a little distance holding it aloft and came to an abrupt halt. Clad in his traditional white attire and donning a white embroidered turban, the Prime Minister started reading out in his grave voice an address before the assembled courtiers and subjects -

Honourable courtiers and officers of Ajagratapura! And dear innocent harmless countrymen! Today - on such and such day and such and such month - with the zodiac signs of cancer and scorpio.... in such year of the Shaka era, in such year of the Hizra era, in such year of the Delhi Sultanate era, and such day and year according to the Christian era - at this auspicious conjuncture - the all-powerful, right-honourable Sri Sri Biradhibirabara Utkala Kulabargeswara, the preserver of dependents and overlord of Bihar, Manipur, Assam, Bangala and Nagaland , has ascended the throne of ancient Ajagratapura. All the invisible powers who guard the universe from all directions hereby stand witness. Let the Supreme Being bless His Majesty with strength necessary for the upkeep of citizens and toadies, chiefs and lords, yogis and tantriks, brahmins and vaishnavites; for rendering service onto men, angels and gods; for the care of the poor, the suffering, the disabled, the widowed and the blind; for keeping at bay the fury of gales, tornadoes, earthquakes, fires and floods; for integrating the sixty-four castes, and finally, for the defense of this country and the annexation of a vast empire.

The announcement was greeted with thunderous applause. The martial bugle blew. The flatterers sang eulogies loudly. Priests joined with resounding recitations from the vedas. Commanders of all ranks shook their swords with a clanging noise. The southerly breeze started blowing. The womenfolk rent the air with ululations. The birds cooed in the trees. A hundred conches blew in unison. One hundred and eight guns roared at once. Flower petals rained from above.

Amidst all this, Baidharbabu sat tongue-tied. From head to foot he remained still and immobile. At this juncture, Her Majesty the Queen with her companions, the two Princesses, the Prince and his brother and other kinsfolk, all in dazzling attire, were ushered into the court. A great commotion ensued among the assembled folk for having seen, or in the eagerness to see, the new arrivals. (It may be mentioned here that the Commander-in-chief and his subordinates had brought Baidharbabu's wife and other family members from their Chhatra Bazaar residence in Cuttack in great style using elephants for this purpose during the three-day blackout interlude. Obviously, Baidharbabu was in the dark because his brain was not functioning .)

In spite of all this, Baidharbabu remained unresponsive which prompted Her Majesty(Jilly's mother) to stroke his forehead gently . Lifting her husband's chin a little she addressed him in a tone of mild rebuke - Dear! Can you hear me? Why don't you look up? Why sit downcast like them clerks? You are a king now.

Finding an opportune moment the Commander-in-Chief put the sceptre in Baidhar's hand and saluted with his sword thrice. As soon as the ornamental rod touched Baidhar's hand his body was galvanised with uncommon energy. He emerged chock-full of strength, ability, intelligence and character. All of a sudden all the cells and sectors of his brain bounced back to life and activity. He felt himself to be as firm and lofty as the Himalayas. Deep like the oceans too. In his mind the words of the poet echoed : " His single blow decimates the Chitrakut mountain, / Slayer of enemies, protects with the strength of thunder." - My might would tame the unruly wind. The rising flames would obey my diktat. Now I can save or kill anyone. One look can wreak havoc. A single shout can shake the three corners of the universe.

He then twirled the royal moustache, shook the sceptre and looked around imperiously. The assembled courtiers shook in terror. All became apprehensive. A little later the emperor thundered:
Who is there?
Yes, your majesty! The attendant *salaamed* and stood in attention.

Convey my pranam to the Chief Priest.
The Chief Priest blessed with both hands raised.

Call the Prime Minister.
The Prime Minister folded his hands in humility.

Summon the Commander-in-Chief .
The Commander-in-Chief repeated the sword-salute three times.

Then Biradhibirabara Maharaja Bayuganjana addressed the subjects in a stentorian voice :

- Dear subjects! Now I hand over this kingdom to you. I will continue as an honorary managing trustee of the subjects for one more week only. During this period the draft constitution shall be prepared. And this kingdom would experiment with democracy and socialism. Note that feudalism and taxes are a thing of the past. I urge you to try and establish a Rama Rajya devoid of exploitation and tyranny.

The Prime Minister and members of the council and other officials were taken by surprise and murmured their disapproval - Your Majesty! What would be our fate?

- You'll fight elections in a democratic system and try your luck.

The Commander-in-chief shook his shoulders and arms repeatedly and held forth - Your Majesty! The country will be controlled by foreign hand. Because once monarchy goes there is bound to be civil war. What will be our role?

- All soldiers shall be engaged in building roads and bridges.

The Chief Priest interceded in a soft voice - There won't be any dharma in the kingdom. We will be jobless.

- Schools and colleges shall be opened all over. Those of you who can shall take up tutoring in holy rites and scriptures. The rest would be engaged in agriculture.

The feudatory chiefs twirled their moustaches and said - And where do we stand?

- All of you form a separate party. But this party shall never be allowed to form government. You will sit in the opposition and offer criticism to the democratic socialist government. Consequently democracy and socialism would advance self-consciously.

The flatterers cringed and complained - O the Great One! Your Highness! What would happen to our oily art hereafter?

Baidharbabu replied smilingly - All varieties of oil, be it vegetable, mineral or chemical, and all manners of oil consumption shall have to bear the brunt of heavy taxation apart from other restrictions. The toadies would be re-deployed in cleaning city drains and village ponds. Some would be engaged in spraying disinfectants in sewers.

At this juncture a noisy confusion started among the subjects. Some immature and unformed young subjects forced themselves into the court arena and began shouting - Give it to us! Give it to us! Hand over the sceptre.

This made the elders pick up courage and they too put forth their demand vociferously - Sir ! These youngsters will spoil everything. They must wait their turn. Do give us the sceptre first.

At this sudden turn of events some women too came forward to demand shrilly - Hand over the sceptre to us. We are no longer interested in working with ladles. Seeing this the children too smelt some gift in the air and whimpered - Give it to us. Give it to us.

Baidharbabu addressed the sceptre-crazy masses in a calm and grave voice - No. I shall entrust the sceptre to the President. But all of you will get the right to vote in the elections. And the children will be given sweets and chocolates every year on the Independence Day and the Republic Day

The subjects dispersed severally after this announcement.

Her Majesty the Queen, Jilly's mother, was seen beating her forehead

soon after. She approached her husband in a tearful voice - Dear majesty! Did your fat head contain all this? Was it all cooking when you sat mute all along? How would I spend my time now?

Baidharbabu comforted Jilly's mother only as he could and confided in her in an easy tone - Dearie. Proceed to the kitchen immediately. Cook the special dish of *mohurali* fish flavoured with *ambula*. We shall eat.

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It took approximately a fortnight to implement, in large measure, all the decisions. Thereafter Baidharbabu and family boarded the Utkal Express in Delhi and returned to the Chhatra Bazaar residence.

Then he spent his days in a most carefree manner as in the past. Regular visits to the office, attending to filework assiduously, borrowing and repaying, eating dahibara, enjoying gudakhu, playing with granddaughter, seeing Ramlila and leading a harmless marital life with Jilly's mother - such activities continued as before. But Baidharbabu acquired an invaluable experience. He understood how the common man is a victim of circumstances and how the common man returns to a state of normalcy after controlling such circumstances in an uncommon manner.

- Translated by Ram Shankar Nanda

TALE OF THE OMINOUS SON

Achyutananda Pati

On that day, for the first time the owl fledgling opened his eyes. In the deep hollow of the tree trunk, he opened his eyes to darkness, everywhere there was thick darkness. His mother sat covering him with her wings. Placing his soft limbs on the bristly bed of sticks and straw, he was dreaming of many things. There was some cawing noise on the upper branches of the tree. For some reason, the wings of his mother fluttered. She puffed up her feathers for a while and then cuddled him close to her body. He felt a bit cosy. Then he smiled in his bird like chirpiness. His mother rubbed her beak with his little beak and advised him in whispers to keep quiet and be still. He wondered why his mother spoke thus. The creases and folds of his skin gradually unfurled in the soft feathery warmth of his mother's tenderness. He felt light. He wanted to stand up. He stretched his limbs for a while in that bristly bed of sticks and straw. His mother too moved a little away from above him. She pecked at his tiny limbs and straightened them. The fledgling looked up for a while. Darkness was perhaps thinning out. He closed his eyes. For a moment he looked at his mother and then again looked up. Mother understood his mind. Placing her stub nose on his, she said,

"My little darling ! how soon have you become so wise. O.K., wait for some more time; let feathers appear on your wings. I'II teach you to fly. I'II teach you all the tricks of flapping your wings. You will travel across heaven and see new things for yourself. Here you lie in darkness, but when you go out into the open it will no more be dark. There, white light will be oozing out of the round moon. Little stars will be lovingly winking at you. I'II introduce you to new things of heaven when I take you out on a round. Grow up soon. Become strong soon".

His mother shoved a bit of a guava into his tiny beak, bringing it from the corner of the hollow. He swallowed it slowly moving his beak. Ah !

How sweet ! He thought of enjoying everything nice and sweet of the world. Indeed the world was very sweet.

From underneath the tree passed a train of vulpine creatures making the familiar *Huke-Ho* noise. The fledgling had fallen asleep under the warm feathers of his mother. He was dreaming of many things. His dreams related to the undiscovered World. All around there were sweet guavas spread on the ground. The round moon was descending down the heaven. There was no sign of darkness. His beak opened up with an unwitting smile. The noise from down below woke him up. There was pitch darkness all around. The fledgling's feelings went sour. It was a moment before he awoke that he was experiencing sweet dreams. His mother was ruffling her feathers sitting on the edge of the hollow. He cried out".

"Maa, I will visit the World today. I'll leave this place to play with the moon".

His mother came in and cuddled him close to her body.

He slipped out of his mother's feathers. He did not like darkness at all. His mother said fondly.

You have come to this World. Who prevents you from going round the World? You must go out into the world as a grown up and a strong one, else there is always the possibility of being cheated. Have little patience. It is a matter of a few more days only. I will take you out on my own. Sleep there for a while I am leaving and will come back soon with new things for you. Keep sleeping. You must be hungry. I will come back soon. Don't make any noise.

His mother left him only after giving him a fond peck on the beak. The fledgling closed his eyes. With eyes closed he dreamt of light spread out everywhere. The World of brightness and radiance tempted him with a guava. His eyes were becoming heavy with sleep. He found that his wings had now developed a thicker outgrowth of feathers than his mother. He was flying happily with his wings rubbing with the moon. His legs have now become stronger than before. He was able to standup. Feathers have heavily cropped up on his wings. He went crazy thinking of the bright World. As he imagined the fancies of the World, his mind was becoming jammed with moonlight and guava. He was becoming enormously restless. He was pestering his mother quite often that he is a grown up now and it is time for him to go out into the open World for a stroll.

That day, the mother-owl brought her son to the edge of the hollow for the first time, after being pestered with for too long. She showed the moon to him pointing with her beak. His eyes were dazzled. Ah! What a beauty! How dark it was where he way lying. The Fledgling, then spread open his wings and tried to hop and fly, keeping pace with his mother. He hopped from one branch to the other. His wings ached. He flew up on to the top branch at one go. He sat up there looking at the moon. The aches gradually vanished from his wings. He was getting drenched with the showers of light coming from the moon. He even thought of opening his beak and taking in a few draughts of moonlight. His mother arrived at that moment. She took him back into the hollow after a lot of persuasion.

It was noon. Mother-owl was on a short nap. He came out slowly crossing the precinct of the hollow.

"Oh! What an abundance of bright light !"

He exclaimed, "Today's moon is larger than that of the other day, and it is flaming bright". He looked at it. His eyes felt a burning sensation.

"Oh my God! What a blazing light !"

Two Myna-fledglings were hopping from branch to branch. They were singing with their mother in unison. The fledgling felt sad at the thought that his mother was perhaps not as good as the mother of the Mynas; for she had never taught him to sing; basking under the radiance of the bigger moon. He went near the Mynas, trying to sing like them. The Mynas were frightened. They yelled aloud. Their mother came running and started pecking at him. A crow came cawing aloud. The sleep of the mother-owl got a jolt. She came rushing and snatched her child away into the hollow. The fledgling was angry with his mother. She had spoilt everything. In a fit of anger, the fledgling started pecking violently at his mother. He tried to go out once again. He rudely complained why his mother had not shown him the bigger moon, earlier. His mother in a consoling tone and with deep anguish said, Be quiet my son. Close your mouth. That is not the moon my son. That is the sun. In our world there is no place for the sun. We are denizens of darkness. You even cannot see the moon every night. We have darkness as our share. We have to live with it. Otherwise, there is sure death for us, my son.

The fledgling was annoyed at his mother's words. Why couldn't he go into the world of the sun? Why could not he stroll in the Kingdom of

light? Who has made such laws to trouble them? He was moving forward angrily. His mother dragged him into her fold. He uprooted a few feathers from his mother's plume, in utter annoyance. His mother wept piteously. He returned, seeing his mother weep. The crows were making a hell of noise from the other side of their nest. His mother cursed herself for having spoilt her son's mind with all those rubbish tales about the sun.

We are the denizens of darkness. We belong to the clan of the ominous. We are the curse of the World. If we set out to seek light we shall die. In the realm of light, the sons of brightness are waiting to hunt.

The mother-owl wept incessantly, as he spoke of their misery. Consoling his mother, the fledgling said,

Be patient my mother. Let me grow up. I will definitely take you to the kingdom of light. I will kill and destroy all those enemies.

On that day, both the owl-mother and her son were perched on a mango branch. There was no moon in the sky. The fledgling felt listless. All of a sudden some light appeared through a crack of the neighbouring house. The owl fledgling became jubilant. He opened his beak and started singing a song. Some one reprimanded from within, with harsh words:

Fly off, you brazen faced wretch! Or else, I will parch your back with a frying pan; then perhaps you will understand what I say. Get lost, let the wretched diarrhoea take you!.

The mother- owl kissed her son as she advised him to speak nothing. The fledgling was annoyed. What justice, they will use light as if it is their sole property and we will be scolded if we rejoice seeing light. No, that cannot happen. He wanted to get through the window and snatch away light from them. His mother wept bitterly and thus prevented him from doing so. After sunset, the fledgling tested the strength of his wings, before setting out of his home. He found to his satisfaction that all the feathers had grown on both his wings. He stretched his legs as he went dancing around for a while. He was strong enough. He struck his beak on the tree trunk. His beak was quite strong and hard now. He flew off. In the dark of the night he sat in the hollow of a tree. He had decided not to return home. He will roam freely in the kingdom of the sun. He will conquer light. He will confront his enemies face to face.

Night thinned out gradually. From the bottom of the horizon, there emerged a fountain of red light. The owl-fledgling never had such a visual experience of light's first entry into the kingdom of the sun. He saw with

eyes wide open, this spectacle of the bright inverted pitcher emerging out, in total oblivion of his own self. Hundreds of birds flew past him, flapping their wings and singing varied melodies. Hundreds of his brothers will roam around freely in brightness, enjoying the spice of life, and he would die rotting in the dark, in utter fear and despondency? No, that won't be allowed to happen. He was mentally strong now. The sun was slowly climbing up in the sky. Day light was getting intense. In such a wide and beautiful world of light, won't there be any place for him? No, he will enjoy to his heart's content. He will let the world know, that he too is the son of light. He too has a rightful claim to belong to this kingdom.

The fledgling started moving about as he wished. He inspected every detail of things of the world with open eyes. He was suddenly attacked from behind. He turned. His mother had identified this stranger as an enemy, before. These are the people who have snatched away light from them. He attacked the crow with his beak. Defending itself, the crow cawed loudly for help. Flights of crows came rushing making a great hue and cry. The owl-fledgling could understand that he was too weak to defend himself against such a large and strong force of the adversary. He rushed towards the tall building flapping his wings in haste. He sneaked into the house through a small passage on the wall. He had entered the inner precincts of the house. Outside was the noisy flight of crows hovering around. He sat resting for a while, quietly. Let the opportunity come. Let them disperse, he would take his revenge on that crow, he thought. He will retrieve his rightful share from the kingdom of light. He is not a curse of darkness. He is the scion of light. He will enjoy light to his heart's content today.

In that building, on thick cushions, lay the wealthy merchant Dhirumal. He was having fever with repeated convulsions. Dhirumal was restless. He was groaning in pain and aches, caused by high fever.

See that the mustard oil has an adulteration of eighty percent *Agara*. Remember to file the fifth suit against Madana Barik. That rascal's sister claims to be a vestal virgin. The moment I placed my hand fondly over her, that bitch of a woman raised her hand to strike me. Can you hear me! Send around twenty goons and harvest the standing crop from Priya Mishra's land. Money won't be a problem. He doesn't care to offer me a Namaskar even, for he thinks he is too much of an educated man! Come here, and listen to me carefully; that Calcuttan Bengali has promised to provide me with hundred tolas of opium. Keep an eye on him .

These are the so called elite of the Kingdom of light. It is for them that the sun gives day light everyday. The fledgling saw everything with eyes wide open. All of a sudden, some one sitting very near Dhirumal's bed, someone who was a sincere and true servant of the kingdom of light, saw this owl-fledgling.

Ominous! Inauspicious ! Sign of dark death! An owl has entered the room. Master is ill.

The servants made a noisy commotion. Someone got hold of a long bamboo stick and drove away the fledgling, pricking and poking at him. Both his wings were injured. He managed to fly up to the top of the building and sat there, languishing in pain. Some crows from the near by tree came attacking him again. Annoyed with these noisy crows, a servant boy came up to the top of the building and struck a hard blow on the owl-fledgling; the cause of the trouble. .The fledgling tumbled down. They burnt some straw and then extinguished the flames with turmeric water. Any way, the evil omen won't have any effect now.

The hoards of crows pounced on the weak and injured fledgling. A lot of blood streamed down his wings in heavy spurts. He looked skyward. High up in the sky was the sun, still pouring a lot of light. In great pain he stood up and turned homewards. He fell down at the bottom of the tree that was his home. He could not fly up to his hollow, his home. His mother was waiting anxiously for the return of her son. What could she do? How will her son take refuse in this broad daylight? The mother's heart was fidgeting with all sorts of apprehensions. Hearing her son's call, she rushed to the bottom of the tree. She went speechless at the sight of the blood soaked body of her son. The fledgling looked up for a while. The Mynas were singing boisterously, up in the branches.

The sun was sliding down sheets of light from the sky on to the earth. The owl-fledgling spoke keeping his head on his mother's lap.

Don't weep my mother. Tell my brothers, if there be any, that their elder brother has become a martyr, having fought valiantly to win the kingdom of light.

The owl-fledgling closed his eyes forever. The sun was still pouring an abundance of light on his Earth.

Tr. By - Ramanendra Mohapatra

THE SPECTACLES

Bijoy Krushna Mohanty

Of late, Nabaghanababu has been thinking of changing the lenses of his bi-focals. He has been finding it difficult to make out the letters on the page as well as recognising people from a distance. He cannot respond immediately when someone greets him, which is a cause of great embarrassment.

Nabaghanababu is a head-clerk. Initially, his juniors were hurt when he did not respond to their greetings. Later, when they realized his difficulty, they started greeting him from close quarters, instead of from a distance, thus eliciting a proper response.

Once Nabaghanababu failed to notice when his boss passed him by on the corridor. After the boss left another colleague of his came closer and whispered, "Couldn't you recognise Mr. Achari, he just crossed your path?" The colleague was actually wondering why Nabaghanababu did not greet his boss.

Nabaghanababu turned pale when he learnt this: "What Mr. Achari might have thought about him indeed! "

Once he offered a one-rupee coin to the vegetable vendor thinking it to be a fifty - paise coin. He realized his mistake when the vendor returned the excess amount.

These days the one-rupee and two-rupee coins are almost of the same size. Nabaghanababu has often offered two-rupee coins in place of one-rupee ones. On a few occasions, depending on the honesty of the person concerned, he has got back the excess money.

While eating, even with the spectacles on, he has sometimes swallowed ants and strands of hair along with his food and has had to throw up.

After so much of trouble, Nabaghanababu has not been able to change the lenses of his spectacles yet. Every month he decides to change it,

thinking it will cost him merely seventy rupees. But each month he fails to pull together seventy rupees from his limited income. It is not an easy task after all to save that kind of money after meeting the needs of his wife, one school - going and two college - going daughters and that of his only son Prabhat who is a student of the M.A. class.

So, every month he fails to save the required sum. Recently, his wife has also started complaining about her own blurred vision. She also needs to have an eye-test and probably has to buy a new pair of spectacles for herself. It is awkward for Nabaghanababu to spend money on his glasses alone, overlooking the need of his wife.

That day, the moment he returned from office, Sulata exclaimed "You know, Prabhat has found a pair of spectacles on his way back from college. It is there on your table."

As he picked up the spectacles along with its cover after entering his room, Nabaghanababu exclaimed, "Oh, how inconvenient it must be for the owner of these glasses ! If the address of the gentleman is somewhere there inside the cover, we can try to hand it over to him. He will definitely be very happy. After all, if you don't have your glasses, it is as good as not having your eyes."

Nabaghanababu opened the cover, found the glasses, but there was no trace of any address whatsoever. Sulata was standing close by, with inquisitive eyes. Nabaghanababu suggested: "We should inform the newspapers about these glasses. But, I hear, the dailies these days are loath to carry these news items. May be they could publish this as an advertisement item charging a fee. Once I had asked an editor about this. He explained that they do not feel sympathetic to a careless person who loses things. I was not willing to buy his argument, since everyone does not lose things due to carelessness. To err is human. One cannot guarantee that if one is careful, accidents will not occur at all. So the editors should be sympathetic when people lose things in spite of themselves.

The editor did not seem convinced. So I tried to explain to him again by asking him to place himself in the position of a victim. Would he consider himself guilty if he ever loses something ? Or would he fervently hope to get back the lost item somehow ? If someone comes up with the lost object, would he not welcome him? So, why should not one have a similar humanitarian sympathy for the misfortune of others? One should not hesitate

to publish at least a small news item of lost or found objects once in a while, in order to help out people. To be honest, the newspapers very often publish a lot of useless things anyway.

The editor got irritated when he heard me out and retorted that, it was easy to argue in that manner, but when one actually ran a newspaper he would realise where the shoe pinches."

Nabaghanababu's words made Sulata apprehensive, "If newspapers do not publish the news the person who has lost something will never come to know of these spectacles."

Nabaghanababu declared firmly, "I shall send this news to all the dailies along with a request which will persuade the editors to publish the item. I presume some newspaper will definitely publish it."

After Sulata's exit, Nabaghanababu started scrutinizing the black - framed bi-focals, and then in a sudden impulse, put it on. The next moment he was taken aback, his face had brightened. What a miracle, things were crystal-clear from a great distance. He opened a book, and the letters were so clear.

An ineffable joy pervaded him.

He removed the spectacles from his eyes hastily and put it in the cover as he heard someone approaching his room.

"Who is there?" He craned his neck towards the door.

Prabhat said as he came in, " I found these spectacles today while coming back from college." He pointed at the object on the table.

"How worried the gentleman must be!" While he said this he realised that this time around his feelings were not genuine.

How quickly his empathy was diminishing!

"We shall send this news of finding a pair of spectacles to all the newspapers ". This statement of Nabaghanababu was not spontaneous either.

Prabhat left the room. Next day in the morning, Nabaghanababu beckoned Sulata, "Hey, do you hear me, please come here."

Sulata was in the kitchen. When she came, she found him poring intently over a book.

"What happened ?" Sulata stood closer to her husband. Shifting his

gaze from the book, Nabaghanababu looked up at Sulata, smiling : "When I wear these spectacles, everything looks very clear to me-the objects from a distance as well as the letters in a book. It appears as if the lenses exactly suit my eyes."

His statement, though, was a lie, for he did not put them on at that very moment, he had already done so the previous evening. Prabhat came in when he heard his father's excited voice, followed by his three sisters.

A strange pair of spectacles adorned Nabaghanababu's face. Everyone looked at him with wonder.

"Prabhat, isn't it strange that this pair of spectacles fits me perfectly." There was a hint of subdued joy in his voice.

The next moment he suddenly became self-conscious and removed the glasses. Now he was more restrained: "How worried the gentleman must be ! Who knows whether he has the means to buy a new pair? Today I am sending the news to all the newspapers. But the crux of the problem is whether it is going to be published." Nabaghanababu gulped after his declamation.

At first, Sulata walked out of the room quietly and then the children followed her in silence.

Tr. by Diptiranjan Pattnaik

THE SALVATION OF A SILK WORM

Durga Madhab Mishra

A few arm chairs on a spacious verandah. A cane table at the centre. Bimal Babu is seated on one of the chairs. A towel hangs from his lap. A mirror and the saving kit on the front table. He would shave himself. Today is the first day of the month- the day for changing his blade. He took out a new blade and called, " Rina ! Rina ! Where's my darling daughter"!

Rina appeared. She was perhaps busy reading the fuzzy history of English literature. Chaucer and Chapman. Who are they after all? Why should she read so much about them? Her soft brows are arched.

" Would you please write the date on the blade"? Bimal Babu said. And Rina wrote the date on the wrapper of the blade-"1st April nineteen hundred..."

Bimal Babu looked at the cover. Clean, beautiful letters - like pearls. He could never resist the temptation of looking at those letters and he asked Rina every time to write the date on the wrapper.

He smiled out of joy.

Rina's brows were straightened. Now she'd go back to her study and continue to mug up Chapman, Homer and Chaucer. She's an honours student. Bimal Babu has knowingly advised her to study the honours course in English.

Bimal Babu began to soap his cheeks leisurely. The transistor on the front table was blaring out some regional news- the number of wells dug in a particular district- a minister advised the students in a meeting to take active part in politics - the Dola Purnima was celebrated with pomp and ceremony throughout the state and there was no accident since the police personnel were alert; the weather would remain dry and no special news for dense agricultural areas.

And then the world news. By that time one of the cheeks was clean-shaven, and by the time the next cheek was attempted, there was a programme about agriculture, about leaf blight and jassids in the paddy fields.

'Oh!' Bimal Babu was perplexed. Stretched his left hand and switched off the transistor. Ten minutes more for All India news.

He washed his shaving gadgets and headed for the bathroom. He'd do the puja rituals, then go through the other morning chores and attend his office. His office room is air-cooled. A few files in cold storage and a designer telephone. It doesn't disturb his peace with its usual tinkles. Rings in the room of his P.A. and if it is urgent, then it would coo just for once. Bimal Babu would lift the phone to say an indifferent 'hello'. Precise talk and definite advice. No one dares to prolong the talk. Just a word or two. Then the telephone silences, the room lies solitary with its closed door and windows.

Like a worm inside the cocoon, layers gather up on it as the years pass by. The silk worm sits lifeless. When'd this cocoon burst? He'd fly off like a butterfly into the infinite sky spreading his wings - in quest of truth, beauty and well being.

But the cocoon does never burst. A smooth, glittering fibrous layer has accumulated since last twenty three years. The sunrays never enter within. The years never destabilize him. He doesn't know what's winter. A world lies outside him, where people die without food. They don't get a drop of water even to drink.

There's a famine. He knows about it all - reports in long sheets of paper reach him. Bimal Babu presses his calling- bell twice. The stenographer enters cautiously.

" Write - a long report "

As if he was an eyewitness. Lifeless writings. Fatuitous are those experiences. The report would be prepared like leaning the umbrella to the side it rains. Bimal Babu stood first class first in English literature. Who'd be able to challenge him in language? Whatever he would write would be the final - like the axiomatic lines of the Vedas. Those reports would lie buried like pearls and rubies. And if some one would like to investigate and research on those passages he would be bound

to praise him with thousand tongues. Ah! What wise administrators lived in this country!

Bimal Babu smiled. The muscles on his lip area expanded for a while to some extent. The head clerk felt gratified as if he saw the sun in a cloud-ridden Shravan.

- " Should we despatch this report, Sir?" The clouds floated again on the rays and the smile faded. The head clerk looked cautious. Did he commit a mistake?

The silk worm within the cocoon struggled for a moment and then was stilled, glowless.

" Alright "

Bimal Babu returned the file. The interview was over.

The head clerk was an expert in such report writing, out of sheer habit. Neither the snake would die, nor the stick would break. He has continuously cultivated the whims and moods of his bosses and that is the secret of his climbing the ladder of his career from the lower division clerk to today's status of a head assistant - a snow haired, hollow-eyed visionless personality-the head clerk.

He came out of the office and smiled a little. The smile was meant to cut through the cocoon walls of the interiority of his silk-worm office like a sharp knife. But it failed. He handed over the file to the young assistant and said, " Send this out".

He disappeared with the file. When this report would reach the capital, it would be known that nothing has happened in this region. Those who have died have died because of natural causes - old age or typhoid. The famine is not at all significant. The canal overflows with water. There'd be rain and the situation would improve. The policy would be decided basing on the available condition.

The head clerk was thinking of purchasing that piece of land lying on the bank of the canal. There won't be any difficulty.

Five o'clock. Bimal Babu came out of his air-cooled room. Got into the vehicle. He'd return home. The stiffened eye- brows have not yet relaxed. He'd have a wash at home and then start for the club. The club would be waiting for him with bridge, billiards and beer. He'd return around ten or eleven in the night, would have his dinner

and stretch his body on the bed : milky and cozy, Dunlop mattress and a switch on the bed side. He'd read a dime novel and then the eyes would close in deep sleep.

And then another morning would dawn, the morning of the second April. The first April passed by garnishing the cocoon with another layer. This would continue.

But there was a crack in the cocoon. Bimal Babu did not come to the office in time. And there was a commotion in the office. It was a news to be discussed.

"Aye ! won't the Sahib come today"?

Everyone asked the same question to Kulamani. And Kulamani gave the same answer, "I don't know".

It's not easy to extract an answer from Kulamani. He's a very faithful peon. He's been working since the imperial times. He's a ginger merchant after all : Why should he bargain for the ship ?

The telephone rang on the head clerk's table.

" Sir! " His face began to sweat. He wiped the telephone instead of his face.

" Yes Sir, I'm going. Just now Sir!"

Forty pairs of eyes were staring at him. Had he been a sixteen year old girl he would have melted in coyness since long.

But -

" Why're you staring at me? Won't you work today? Go. Go to your seats. I'm just coming from his residence".

The forty pairs of eyes were disappointed. The eyes were downcast at this rude behaviour. All of them returned to their chairs like lambs, full of anxiety.

It was quite late when the head clerk returned, but no one was able to leave the office before being relieved of the anxiety. Pal Babu, the senior most clerk some how dared to ask : " What happened Sir?"

The head clerk didn't tell anything. His face was as black as granite. No one could see any reflection on it.

He went straight to his chair and got seated. Pal Babu offered him a cup of tea. Another Senior Clerk, Bishnu Babu offered a glass of cold water. The head clerk was through with his cold water and

then began to touch his lips on the cup. He sipped the tea wordlessly. As if the cup of tea was an endless ocean. When would it be finished ? Everyone stared at him and at his unfinished cup.

The tea was finished at last. No sooner the cup was placed on the table than Pal Babu lifted it.

The head clerk cleared his throat and announced :

" Sahib has gone on leave from today!"

All of them shouted in chorus : " Why sir?"

" He'd go on pilgrimage - Banaras, Gaya, Mathura and Vrindaban... with his family...".

A newly appointed clerk asked " For how many days Sir?"

"For an indefinite period".

And then a little smile.

The head clerk took out a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it over to Pal Babu. And then he leaped out of the office in one breath. He reached the road. He was not able to think as to how he would escape those forty pairs of questioning eyes, how to get himself lost in the stream of men.

He managed to get into a rickshaw and shouted: " Quick!"

Tr. by Ramesh Prasad Panigrahi

THE PAINTED SHEET

Krushna Prasad Mishra

He was my most favourite student. As I explained Wittgenstein to the class, it was only he, who raised the most fundamental questions. After the class, he would follow me to my room and put forward his thoughts on the subject. One day he said, "I feel as if I am wrapped in a sheet of language. The sheet is teeming with pictures: in so many different colours - figures of sun, moon, planet earth; here's my university; a tiger, a bear and a dog; my mother somewhere and my sister, my home, our courtyard, our garden and many more! May be it's possible to see the world that lies outside this sheet, but it's so difficult to take my eyes off these engaging sketches. There must be light, which makes it possible for me to see these pictures. Strange thing is this cover: it keeps enveloped my whole self, God knows since when, but my whole life may pass, just gazing at its figures. Many think they are watching and experiencing reality, but their life's experience remains confined only to this patchwork quilt. They feel they have traversed the universe, but it is the universe of their own sheet, after all!

What's the way out of this veil, he asked me. Is death the only solution? Did Wittgenstein wish to convey the same when he said, "Death is not an event of life?" Or is death simply one more picture on the sheet? Now Dinabandhu, I ask you, haven't you found an answer to your question ? Is Death just one more picture on the sheet, or the route out of it?

The other teachers and the Vice-chancellor had gone back. The boys and girls of the university had also left; some of them even had plans to see a movie. The stooping figure of Dinabandhu's mother in a chair looked like a tree half uprooted by cyclone. A white sheet covered the dead body of Dinabandhu lying on a cot; plenty of flowers, garlands and petals were strewn over it. I consoled Dinabandhu's mother, knowing full well that my words would mean nothing to a

mother who has lost her only son. Dinabandhu's family knew me well, for he had taken me to his house on many occasions.

The other day he had told me, sitting on the cot where his dead body now lay, "I don't want to remain trapped in my words. I know that true salvation lay in action, not , works. " He told me about his childhood memories. He had lost hi: father when very young. "This time I am going to contest for the stud: nts union president.Much needs to be done for the campus. Everybody is so timid, they dare do nothing. Even the VC cringes before the government. This way, no development will ever take place in the university. Go wherever you like, you will feel the discontent smouldering in the very edifice of the campus. The gloom inside the campus depresses me."

It had taken eight to ten hours to get the body from the police, for the town was under curfew. Dinabandhu's friends had come separately to pay their last respects. They had informed that the collector's permission had been obtained for the funeral, which was to take place tomorrow morning.

They had said so many good things about Dinabandhu to comfort his grief- stricken mother. If he had lived on, he would have become someone great one day. He could have even become the Prime Minister of the country. No one had his capacity for sympathy and fellow feeling. Someone added, "He never went alone to the canteen. Would make sure that everyone has eaten before ordering some thing for himself. He would attend only Sir's classes, otherwise spend his time going round other departments, sorting out our problems."

"What a polite man he was! No one ever heard a bad word from him, nor unjustified criticism of the VC and professors. That's why we accepted him as our leader. What an ill-starred moment they chose to go for a departmental picnic! The trouble started with a small argument with the conductor and the cleaner of the bus and soon took such an ugly turn. Throughout the students' strike he had never spoken ill of the bus employees. Always treated them well. But all his good intentions couldn't help matters. The students stopped the Chief Minister's motorcade, and so lathi charge was ordered. Students ran away from the scene, but Dinabandhu didn't. The police took him into custody

even though he was injured badly. In the end, he died in the hospital."

"He had opposed torching down of buses from the beginning. Such mindless crime can never be his handiwork, nor of his followers. When buses were burnt down, he was lying unconscious in the hospital. Outsiders have perpetrated this heinous crime, just to sully our names. At first we felt happy, but soon we realised the gravity of the crime, the loss to the nation."

One of Dinabandhu's close friends added, "We won't get a modest and kind-hearted boy like Dinabandhu. He did not agree to drag the girl students into the agitation. He had always argued that we were responsible for their honour, for the girls would not be able to run away to their safety if the police chased them. And who would protect them from the clutches of the lustful policemen?"

"But Mousi, we cannot under-estimate today's girls," he went on. "They also have a craze for leadership, they also want to fish in troubled waters. They had induced Dinabandhu to call the students' strike, now that he had to fight the election. To win, the candidates must brew mischief, take up arms against the authorities, they had argued."

"You should have seen that scene! While he was shouting slogans sitting on the roof of a bus, the girls clamoured sitting around him. They were beating drums and urging other to join the protest. And Dinabandhu looked so handsome!"

"And that thin girl in a blue saree, who was crying her heart out, sitting at the feet of Dinabandhu, I think she is the root cause of the ugly aftermath. In the students' meeting, she had drawn out her bangle and pushing it into the hands of Dinabandhu, had said it is our honour, the honour of the girls of this campus. If you want to go back on your words, it's OK. Wear these bangles and lock yourselves up in the girls' hostel. We will take care of ourselves.' That slim girl, Priyambada, had woken the boys up that evening. The boys and girls had taken an oath to fight against the staff of the private buses."

Another boy now addressed Dinabandhu's mother, "As the stage was being set for the showdown, a raucous exchange took place in the canteen over a babaji. The mendicant, in a fit of rage, uprooted a strand of his lock and threw it at Dinabandhu. He had appeared from

nowhere, as we sat sipping tea in the canteen. He stood near us and started singing from *Malika*, the Book of Prophesy. Someone ridiculed his manner of singing, 'Enough of your songs, now explain the whole thing in a language we can understand.' The mendicant contorted his face and shot back, 'Can you stand my words if I start explaining them? Your chests will cave in and you will lose your breath for ever.' Another boy taunted him. The mendicant took a pause and went on, 'Have you seen the clouds floating without a drop of rain? What do you make of it? Weird things will torment the earth. The ground will shake; the twelve hand long sword will appear and cut everyone to pieces barring a selected few. Beware of that, you'll see the misfortunes this campus of yours will suffer. Students come here to study, but demand for postponement of examination, they resort to unfair means in the exams, and thrash the teachers. What kind of justice is this-will the earth suffer all these? You'll leave this eating place without paying for your food. If asked for money, you'll declare a strike or even loot the canteen.'

"The students got restless over the mendicant's straight talk and someone shouted, Get lost, go back to your Mataji! What kind of *Malika* have you studied, you fool. Your heavy dose of ganja is fuelling your chatter.' They drove him away. At that time the mendicant uprooted a strand of his hair and threw it towards the gathering. It fell on the food plate of Dinabandhu. Dinabandhu suddenly looked pale and for the rest of the day he remained lost in his thoughts."

After all had left, Dinabandhu's mother cast me a pensive look. I decided to spend the rest of the day there, by her side. I tried to explain to her as I had once done to Dinabandhu. "Whatever changes take place in society, owe their origin in students' leadership. Of course, there was a time when they lived secluded from the mainstream, in the Gurukulas. It is not possible, even justified, to impart such education now. They come to know of the maladies of the society from the newspapers, how can they remain silent inside their homes. They are bound to take part in politics. They are bound to fight for a just society. Because they know that the root cause of their deprivation, misery and frustration is the social system. First they fight for liberty and after that for fulfillment of their other needs."

I had continued as I had once persuaded Dinabandhu to look beyond the books and to get involved in public life. Only the sound of the old woman's snoring put an end to my lecture. After that I had gone to the verandah and tried to sleep on the reclining chair. The face of the dead person was clearly visible from there.

A little while ago, Dinabandhu's widow mother was lamenting. "Dear child, you promised me to take on a pilgrimage, now get up we will set out on our journey. You had promised me to get your younger sisters married. Why do you lie asleep, it is time they should be married. Your papa had left me under your charge, how can you cheat me like this? Please get up my son, don't make me anxious. Go, comfort your sisters, take them out for some fresh air. See how they are weeping. Dina, my child, wake up now."

I couldn't take it any more, so I had gone away from the verandah. The students inside the room were sobbing.

I don't know what time of the night it was. I got up with a start, sat up and looked inside the room. Dinabandhu's mother was gazing intently at the dead body. A fat wad of hundred rupee notes was lying on the cot, near Dinabandhu's mother and then at the body, wrapped inside a white sheet, now covered with flowers of all colours. A big housefly was hovering over the flowers.

I started breathing heavily. As if someone was addressing me in the voice of Dinabandhu, "Sir, what could I have done? The sheet has a picture of this event too. To have a good look at it, my only choice was to go out of the sheet

Tr. by Chinmay Kumar Hota

THE CHIEF QUEEN

Rajeswari Dalabehera

The train slowed down.

Aparna looked through the window of the running train. A thin film of darkness was settling outside. Beyond the darkness, one could see a small light flickering in the village. She wondered what could it be! A witch light? She laughed, whenever she visited her uncle's place and refused to eat, her grandma used to point at the light of the funeral ground on the other side of the river and say 'Look! That's the witch light, Eat quickly. Or it will come and suck your blood. And she believed whatever grandma said - she believed that the witch light would come and suck her blood.

Aparna turned her face. Strange! Why the childhood memories are coming to her now, she wondered. She remembered how in lonely nights while sleeping beside her grandma, she used to listen to the tales of old demoness, and watch the vermilion mark on the grandma. So grandma used to secretly feed her cream of milk and say,"Eat. If you eat cream your body will be as soft and white as cream. Then only your husband will love you. Because I am so fair, your grandfather loves me so much." And then she used to look at my grandfather and give me a mischievous smile. Aparna used to look at her grandma's naugthy smile and wonder, really how beautiful is she and how fair!

The train stopped. It was a station. She tried to look out and read the name of the station. She could not. The name had stayed back, at a distance. She turned her face. Sleeping in the running train the whole day she felt irritated. She felt she should go out for a while. She was hesitating, when suddenly the compartment's door opened and a gentleman came in. He had a suitcase in hand, a cigarette on his lips.

Who? Aparna was startled.

The gentleman advanced towards Aparna, threw away his cigarette and asked-Excuse me. is the upper berth vacant?

Sabyasachi, Aparna's son came forward from the near by berth and in the dim light of the compartment looked at the gentleman and said "We have the two lower berths."

"Thank you!" The gentleman looked at Sabyasachi's face and paused as if he was going to say something. Then he turned, kept his suitacase below and climbed up. As he went up, he cast a questioning look at Aparna.

Aparna was speechless. She was pushing through layers of memory and going backwards to that very day twenty years ago.

The grandma's story of fairy tale prince came alive before her as if the dark bumble bee, the life of the prince in the golden casket at seven cubic deep in water turned on its side... and the memories of past twenty years came alive.

Aparna looked out. The witch light outside the window across darkness had vanished and the station was splashing with light.

And opening her memory's treasure box, Aparna groped through her long lost days !

On the marriage day, with a magnificent silk saree around her extremely fair, velvety body, and golden ornaments on the limbs, as she put her palm on Dipankar's palm, she did not know why inside the strong grip of Dipankar's hand her own soft palm was getting limp. At the time of farewell all cried, she too, but she felt as if not she, but her whole soul cried.

After leaving all the memories of her virgin days, when she entered her mother-in-law's house, she felt more helpless. As if she lost her way, in the vast sprawling Zamindar's house, and felt breathless in the jumbling, pushing crowd. She remembered the fond memories of her father, mother, brother and sister. She wiped her tears. She surely did not want a palace. She only wanted a house, with not so many people around, but only she herself and her husband.

As if Dipankar could read her mind, he drew her to his chest and asked "Aren't you happy?" She hid her face in Dipankar's chest. He raised her bashful face, and said "You are so beautiful, Aparna! Your beauty

made me mad, and I wanted to make you the queen of this palace." Aparna fluttered in agony like a living bird inside a golden cage. Inside the tight embrace of Dipankar she felt as if she was getting choked and tied to a golden chain. She was no longer Aparna. She was only the "Queen Aparna"!

Sabyasachi was born after one year of their marriage. The palace of the Zamindar Dipankar was grandly illuminated. The sound of gongs, conches and the holy greetings of light at the temple of Radha-Madhab announced the birth of the dynasty's successor-and Dipankar grew mad with happiness. That day, for the first time, Aparna felt that there is a greedy, selfish man hidden inside Dipankar - a man different from the one she had known.

Dipankar kept a keen watch on Såbyasachi, even at night. The mother-in-law got irritated 'The nurse is to look after the child. Why else she is there? Let the child sleep with the nurse at night." Aparna also cautioned - "Don't be so fond of the child. Too much of affection will spoil him."

Dipankar did not listen to anybody. He had chosen the name - Sabyasachi. He had said "As Sri Krishna became the charioteer of Arjuna in the Mahabharat war, I would be the charioteer of Sabyasachi in his struggles in life. I will never permit Sabyasachi to be defeated."

But Aparna had removed Sabyasachi from Dipankar's life even before Dipankar could get an opportunity to be his charioteer.

In the darkness of the night she had run away to her father's place along with four year old Sabyasachi, leaving Dipankar and the cursed palace at her back. On the way Sabyasachi had asked - "Where is Papa? Why hasn't he come with us?"

Aparna did not answer.

But when Sabyasachi insisted - "You take me to Papa", she put him on her lap and said "Your Papa is dead. You can't go to him".

Aparna closed the cover on her years-old memory box. For 20 years she has lived only with memories, with pain and agony, and has sighed with the hot air from within. Her only desire has been to see Sabyasachi live as a man, and live away from the artificial, tainted aristocracy, and whims of the Zamindar Dipankar. That's all.

It was all right, she thought. But now suddenly, Dipankar has come back. She thought she would wake up Sabyasachi and tell him that his

father is not dead. The man who climbed to the upper berth a little while ago was his father - Dipankar Das.

Aparna looked at the upper berth, where Dipankar was trying to sleep with a book in hand. That was his habit-even 20 years ago. He can't sleep without a book in hand and Aparna can't sleep with a light on. At times she had removed the book from his hands.

"Please put out the light. I can't sleep."

"No, the light will be there. Why don't you close your eyes and sleep?"

"Even then there will be light."

"Turn on your side and sleep."

Aparna turned her side on her berth. Sabyasachi got up. "Ma, can't you sleep?

"No, it is O.K."

Aparna tried to sleep. She couldn't. All the old memories were racing around her. She remembered how she used to be restless on her bed in nights when she could not sleep. Dipankar used to draw her to his chest and smother her hair. and then snuggling on his chest, like a child, she used to sleep.

Dipankar used to tease her - "Where did you sleep like this before marriage ?" Aparna shied away.

Before Sabyasachi's birth she had asked him one day "If I die?" Dipankar had said - "I can't build a Tajmahal like Shahjahan. But I will have a temple for you in my heart."

Aparna had smiled - "Whoever is born dies. If I really die?"

"Well I will have to find out another queen to fill your place."

The train roared outside breaking the sleep of the lonely night. Aparna shivered. She remembered the night when she took the decision to move away from Dipankar's life.

That was a new moon night. Looking at the darkness outside she had asked Dipankar.

"Is it a fact what I hear?"

"What?"

"You are going to marry again?"

Dipankar drew the wrapper on his body.

"Won't you answer?" Aparna had insisted.

"This is our family tradition that the male members marry more than once."

Aparna was shocked - "Whatever mistakes your father and grandfathers did, are you going to repeat them ?"

"This is our family's aristocracy. Every woman in this house has adjusted to that. Where is the mistake? Besides, you will continue to be my chief queen."

Aparna had shivered looking at the thick darkness outside. She understood one thing - that Dipankar was not a real lover. Under the mask of a lover, he was a heartless sex-starved man. He never loved Aparna, he loved Aparna's body.

She had shrunk in anger, disgust and humiliation. It would be better to die than to live as the so-called chief queen of the palace.

Dipankar had told Aparna that his decision was final like Bhishma's. Aparna decided not to stay with Dipankar as his second woman. That is why she left his house along with Sabyasachi, and left a letter for Dipankar.

"I have no desire to stay as the chief queen of your harem. I am a woman and I dislike staying as the second woman in your life. Even if I stay as the chief queen of your harem, will the other woman tolerate me? A woman can offer herself to her husband, but she can't offer her husband to another woman. I am not the blue-throated Lord Shiva. The poison from the churning sea will kill me. That is why, I am leaving you. I am also taking your child along with me."

She didn't get a reply to her letter, neither he came to take back Sabyasachi.

Aparna turned on her side and wiped away the flowing tears with the edge of her saree.

"Ma-?"

"Yes, my son?"

Sabyaschi placed his hand on his mother's back - "Aren't you asleep?"

Aparna patted his head - "No, I don't feel like sleeping. I don't know why I remember old days. I am afraid if this night ends, it will never come back again."

Dipankar glanced through the book, and turned his eyes on Aparna's.

Aparna felt as if the dark bumble-bee of the grandma's tale fluttered under the seven cubic water and as if the lid of the golden casket was going to be thrown open.

Dipankar's glance was taking her back to old days with the same question?

"Where were you all these days?"

The closed temple was cracking.

The loose clothes of the night were fluttering away.

And Aparna was breathless, struggling to hold on.

Somebody, somewhere sobbed across the pale night. And the echoes died far away in the wind.

Dipankar shifted his eyes from Aparna's and turned the pages of his book once again.

The speed of the train slowed down. Dipankar looked through the window - a station ahead. He took out the specs and closed the book.

The station came. Dipankar got up. Aparna tossed in agony- is he getting down? The bridal night of the Chief Queen Aparna has not yet begun! The night is still there ! He has not said a single word.

Dipankar got down from the upper berth. As he straightened his shirt, he looked at Aparna again, as if he wanted to say something. He took out a comb from his pocket, combed his hair and looked at Sabyasachi.

Was it a look, or an embrace? Aparna wondered. His eyes were still on Aparna's eyes and he bent down to lift his suitcase.

Aparna got up. She would not permit the bumble-bee of seven cubic water to fly away. She would stop it. She extended her hand to hold the suitcase and stop Dipankar. But before she could do that Dipankar's eyes shifted and his face turned away.

Aprna wanted to scream, but could not. As if somebody jammed her throat.

Dipankar got down from the train. Aparna looked on like a stone statue.

Tr. by Jatindra Mohan Mohanty

THE LADY WHO DIED ONE AND HALF TIMES

Manoj Das

(Samanta and Abolkara are two folk characters, popular in entire Orissa. Samanta is a noble, learned and much-traveled man who, in his old age, is inspired to travel through the several places he had visited earlier. But he must have a companion. The young Abolkara (literally meaning the disobedient or whimsical) rustic, curious, but faithful, agrees to accompany him on the condition that should some object or situation intrigue him, he will stop and not resume walking until Samanta had explained its mystery to him.)

Abolkara hoped that once they had crossed the inhospitable forest, they would find a reasonably fine locality, in keeping with the law of meeting a dawn after a night.

And, no doubt, the land they entered was charming. Abolkara occasionally made a comment or two, which he was sure were quite valuable on the flora and fauna, and followed his master with dainty steps.

But they had to halt near a beautiful park, for what wended its way from the opposite direction was a silent and dignified procession, headed by the king who dismounted from his elephant and placed a bouquet on a tomb at the centre of the park. He then knelt down and so did the others. They passed a few moments in silence and then departed.

"The king looked more like an ascetic, if not a sage, than a potentate," observed Abolkara. "Whose is this tomb, sir ?"

"Of a one-and-half-times dead lady," answered Samanta, almost lost in some remote reverie.

They sat down under a banyan tree, close to a cool lake, for a frugal lunch, but as Samanta finished with his last bite, Abolkara crooned very warmly, "Sir !"

"Yes !"

"I keep sitting."

I can very well see that !"

"I don't feel like getting up."

"Look here, Abol, is it terribly important that you must preface your demand with that uncanny and worn-out threat ? Since I've unwitting. uttered a rather intriguing phrase, I must give out the story behind it to explain it !

***

Not far from the city of Labang was Sage Dhiman's hermitage ideally located in a lush green forest. Among his disciples was Tanmoy, brilliant in studies and an adept at Yoga. He was dear to all for his courtesy and kindness.

The river Kshipra, flowing by the hermitage, was in spate. An ace swimmer, Tanmoy loved to float with or against the strong currents for long stretches of time. The river had turned like a sickle a furlong beyond the bathing ghat used by the inmates of the hermitage. Tanmoy, about to emerge from the waters after a swim at dawn, was surprised by a shriek and before he had been able to trace its origin, what got entangled round him was not exactly a creeper, but almost rivalling it in tenderness, a damsel.

Tanmoy was about to lose his balance, but with a masterly manipulation of strength and strategy, managed to hurl the damsel to the sallow margin of the stream. In the process he slipped and was swept away for a few yards, but steadied himself in time before falling into a whirlpool.

He could save himself from the current, but not from the one he saved. The grateful Susmita, the adopted daughter of the Tantrik Chandagauranga residing in a relatively dense part of the forest, began conquering, chunk by chunk, his heart and his mind. No wonder, for her body was like a Chompuk flower, her eyes a pair of glittering stars; while sometimes they twinkled like diamonds, at some other times they were as tender and inviting as two drops of dew.

The phase of familiarity when they would meet on the river bank, in the light of a setting sun or under the colourful canopy spread by a cluster of Krishnachura trees, either keeping their exchange to a few indistinctly uttered words or entrusting the koils with the task of speaking on their behalf, gave way to the intimate phase when Tanmoy paid his first visit to

her home and paid obeisance to her foster-father, Chandagauranga., Susmita's wit and suavity impressed Tanmoy more and more and her love and concern for him, deeply.

"Father says you have, hidden in you, a great capacity for practising the Tantra. You can do that with ease and become a past-master in the lore, like himself," Susmita informed him.

"I have neither the courage to refute your father's estimate of my capacity nor the courage to take to the practice of Tantra," replied Tanmov.

"But why ?"

"My guru had once briefly explained to me the philosophy of Tantra. There lies a Divine principle at the root of every phenomenon. The Tantriks involve themselves in and delve deep into the very attractions which the spiritual seekers of other disciplines are keen to avoid. The Tantriks enter the dusky tunnel of occult laws with the aim of emerging into the sunlight of Truth at its other end, but only one in ten thousand succeed in that; the rest are lured and diverted by false lights emanating from the numerous labyrinths branching out of the tunnel, lights of puny Siddhis or powers for performing miracles. They go in quest of truth, but become slaves of Avidya - tricks performed by the lower Prakriti. I do not think I will be able to pass that severe test. In any case, my guru himself would have directed me to your father had he known that to be my Swadharma.

If anything, Susmita's was a mysterious smile of relief. "Well, if it is not your intention to lead a life of rigorous askesis, then.." she blushed at her own unspoken proposition.

"Surely, I intended pursuing Yoga seriously, if not the dangerous path of Tantra. But that was before meeting you.."

That was early in spring. There were only sporadic blossomings of flowers, hinting at far greater possibilities - at a future season of rainbows on earth! The buds whispered to the lovers not to divulge all their dream at once. In fact the two were dreaming of a spring that had no end.

Sage Dhiman was then preparing to take a break in the Himalaya. Tanmoy was required to be at his beck and call before his departure. He could not meet Susmita for five days. But when he met her at last, Susmita looked somewhat dazed - as if petrified on the frontiers of dream and wakefulness.

"You look rather strange " observed Tanmoy.

"Do I ? Then it is for your sake."

Tanmoy stood puzzled, but his eyes were forceful enough to elicit from her an annotation of her riddle. Unknown to her father, Susmita had performed a Tantrik rite with Tanmoy for its focus. It could ensure him a throne.

It is difficult to say how much importance Tanmoy gave to it.

"Is it possible to change one's destiny through a Tantrik rite ?" he asked.

"No. Nothing can truly change one's destiny but one's Karma - or the Divine's Grace," Susmita admitted.

"Well, I don't see any reason for the Divine's Grace to change my destiny. And so far as my own Karma is concerned, it is hardly likely to secure me a crown."

"Are you sure ?" demanded Susmita. "Isn't your relation with me a Karma ? Is that not capable of influencing your destiny ? And haven't you consciously embraced this Karma ?"

Tanmoy had no answer. Only if one could draw a line between one's conscious actions and actions guided by forces beyond one's control At which point could he check the Karma to which Susmita alluded - his burgeoning relationship with Susmita ?

"Father once told me that your destiny is marked by two possibilities. You are likely to become either a king or a spiritual Guru. People may view the position of a king with awe, but viewed from a higher plane, the kingship is nothing more than one of the several phases of experience for the soul's progress through numerous lives. Your becoming a king need not be beyond your Karma."

A charmed Tanmoy realised the limitation of his own knowledge. "But how could you perform the rite ? Isn't Tantra a prohibited zone for women ?" he asked, changing the topic.

"Superstition," commented Susmita. "What is the very basis of Tantra ? Is it not Shakti, the feminine principle of Nature ? My father had initiated and turned into Vairavis quite a few women There are of course some specific rites forbidden for women, but they

don't include one which is performed for the benefit of someone else, in a spirit of selfless goodwill."

Tanmoy was about to ask, "But was yours nothing more than pure selfless goodwill for me ? Did it not hide in itself the pride of moulding someone's destiny as well as a desire to share his changed life ?"

"Whatever I have done, I've done for you - nothing for me " said Susmita, perhaps under a compulsive feeling to justify her action.

Tanmoy laughed cautiously. "But will the throne to the king's left remain vacant? I am not the one to go content with a golden image for my consort " he said and both of them blushed.

"I am in total darkness about my own destiny. If I ask Father, he either makes light of it or avoids speaking about it. But soon thereafter he resigns to a sort of gloom. Since this has happened several times, I cannot say that his mood was unrelated to my query." Susmita looked gloomy herself.

Tanmoy could not understand why, but he was overwhelmed by a strange feeling while leaving Susmita. There was no longer any thrill in him in anticipation of a delightful future. He felt grateful to Susmita, but inexplicably sad too. It was always risky to intervene in the natural course of one's destiny through occult means. Why did his darling Susmita have recourse to that kind of an audacious act? He did not fail to observe how Susmita herself had stopped smiling spontaneously as she used to.

It was evening. Sage Dhiman summoned Tanmoy and focused his eyes on his face with an intriguing concentration. Tanmoy lowered his eyes.

"My boy, accustomed that you are to long spells of meditation, it should not be difficult for you to confine yourself to your dwelling tomorrow, right from the sunrise till the sunset. It will be good for you," said the Guru.

Tanmoy looked up, surprised. But the Guru walked away, indicating that he was not willing to give any reason for his advice.

There was no question of Tanmoy disobeying the Guru. He, as usual, took bath at dawn and entered his cave mid-way up a low hill and sat down and shut his eyes, but only to realise before long how difficult it was to concentrate on his inner being once the habit had been broken by preoccupations passionate in nature. He felt ashamed; at the same time he

could not curse himself for his condition for, that would mean cursing Susmita - who had usurped the role of meditation in his life.

However, determined to revive the practice, by and by he got immersed in a light trance.

A sudden burst of unusual noise and hullabaloo compelled him to return to the surface of his consciousness. He stood up and stepped out of his cave, still in a state of stupor, still insensitive to space and time. Sunset was only a moment away.

A massive elephant, bedecked with jewellery and garlands, was walking briskly at the head of a glittering procession comprising the Prime Minister, the General, the Kotwal, the Chief Priest and a hundred-strong line of courtiers and nobles followed by a thousand curious commoners.

The elephant suddenly came to a halt. And, before Tanmoy had comprehended the situation, it raised its trunk holding a golden pitcher and poured its content - fragrant water sanctified by certain rites - on Tanmoy's head.

Thunderous applause and shouts of joy shook the forest and were echoed in the hills. The Prime Minister, the General, the Kotwal and the priest hurriedly climbed the rocks and greeted Tanmoy with impressive humility. "Your Highness, be pleased to ride the elephant " they said.

"What for ? " asked Tanmoy, totally bewildered.

"You are our new king, as ordained by Providence " revealed the Prime Minister.

"Perhaps you are not aware of the fact that our noble king passed away without leaving any male heir " observed the General.

"And, in keeping with the hoary tradition, we left the choice of the new king to the royal elephant. In fact, we were wondering why the elephant entered the forest But it knew !" added the Kotwal.

"Pardon us, but your Majesty must hurry, for it is only after your coronation that the mortal remains of our late king can be consigned to flames Who but a king can order the disposal of another king's body !" explained the priest and he added, "The auspicious hour for the cremation is approaching."

The Prime Minister and the General almost pushed Tanmoy towards the elephant and a dozen trained attendants vied with one another in putting him on the throne fixed on the grand animal's back.

The elephant trumpeted and made a turn and headed towards the palace. The orphaned princess Haimavati - the queen had died earlier - received the incumbent to her father's throne by garlanding him.

The hapless Tanmoy was obliged to bear with the strenuous process of coronation. He was then made to pass his first order as the monarch - to remove his predecessor's dead body from the palace for funeral rites.

All through the chanting of the hymns by the priest and heaping of lyrical praise by the court-poets, Tanmoy thought of nothing else but Susmita. How effective proved the rites she had performed for him ! The only other thought that amazed and pained him was the foresight of his Guru, Sage Dhiman. The Guru had forbidden him to come out of his cave before sunset. Obviously the Guru did not desire this to happen to him.

"I must go and meet my Guru. I had no time to seek his sanction and blessings before stepping into this role," Tanmoy told the Prime Minister when he got a chance after three days of continuous rites.

"Maharaj, Sage Dhiman has already left for the Himalaya. However, you will be free to move about only after the next ritual is concluded," informed the Prime Minister.

"Next ritual ?"

"Your marriage with Princess Haimavati."

"But that's absurd and impossible !" Tanmoy shrieked out his protest.

"What's absurd and impossible, Your Majesty ?" the four senior officers asked him, quite surprised.

"If wed I must, it should be to Susmita, the daughter of Tantrik Chandagauranga. I'm committed."

The Prime Minister and the General laughed, albeit modestly.

"My lord, the commitment was made by a poor Ashram youth not by Maharaja Tanmoy Dev. Much of your past has lost its relevance," said the two top administrators, dividing the statement between themselves.

"Maharaja, what is really absurd is the idea of your marrying Susmita. I wonder if it is known to you that she is not the Tantrik's own daughter but merely adopted by him. She could very well be illegitimate." The priest's was a guardian's warning.

"Well, my lord, there could be no objection to Susmita being admitted into the queen's apartment as a companion of the princess and as your concubine." The Kotwal exuded the confidence of one who had solved a knotty problem.

"Once again I say, all this is absurd and impossible ! My marrying the princess is out of question!" Tanmoy had never before raised his voice to that pitch.

"To be honest, you married her the moment you let her garland you ! And once she had garlanded you in public, how can she marry anyone else ? The tradition demands that if the king died without a male heir, whoever ascends the throne must wed his daughter, if he had any," explained the Prime Minister.

"Look here, gentlemen," Tanmoy blurted out impatiently, "if the elephant emptied the golden pitcher on my head, it is because of Susmita. I don't know how to explain the mystery to you!"

The guardians of the throne looked at one another. At last the priest cleared his throat. "Your Majesty, probably you cannot explain it and we assure you, you need not. For us the mystery has only one interpretation. It was Providential. For you, as we see the situation, it was a quirk ! That's all !"

But Tanmoy remained unconvinced. Arguments continued till it was past midnight and they remained inconclusive.

Tanmoy tossed on his bed ; sleep evaded him.

A little before dawn he was shocked by a feminine cry. Whose voice was that ? Who was being threatened with dire consequences by the guards outside the palace gate?

He came out of his bedroom. At once two of his personal attendants came running and bowed to him.

"Well, was there some commotion outside ?"

"Nothing unusual, Maharaj !"

Tanmoy concluded that what he thought he heard was a delusion. It was almost unlikely that Susmita should try to gatecrash at that unearthly hour, demanding a meeting with him.

He was required to sit in the court all the time the next day for the chieftains of the kingdom to kneel and profess their allegiance to him and submit their gifts, one by one. Then it was the turn of the emissaries of the neighbouring kingdoms to greet him. Tanmoy exchanged pleasantries with them, smiled and nodded, but without the least enthusiasm. At every opportunity he reiterated his resolve against marrying the princess.

Exhausted, he was at last about to retire for the night when the chief maid of the palace appeared before him.

"My lord, Princess Haimavati would like to say a word to you."

The maid receded and the princess emerged from the other side of the screen.

Tanmoy had seen her only once before. She was most beautiful. Now she was weeping and its impact on Tanmoy was shattering.

"My lord !" uttered the princess as she gulped a sob. "Kindly do not reduce me to a laughing stock before the world. Just bear with the wedding ceremony. Then I will disappear from your sight, I promise. You'II be at liberty to bring home the bride of your choice."

She did not wait for a reply and was escorted away by her maids.

Tanmoy stood thunderstruck.

The next day the Kotwal informed him, trying to sound absolutely casual, that the Tantrik Chandagauranga and his daughter were not to be seen anywhere. Perhaps they had left for some unknown destination.

"The conduct of Tantriks is always mystifying," the Kotwal remarked in a style befitting a wise man.

Tanmoy did not know how to go about looking for them. The pressure on him for marrying the princess was mounting. Besides, he could not forget her tearful face and appeal.

The marriage was performed.

Once again tradition demanded that the couple visit Varanasi within a fortnight of the ceremony. King Tanmoy and Queen Haimavati undertook the travel, but, the very day of their arrival in the city the queen took ill. The physician of the king of Kashi attended upon her and did his best, but the old veteran looked more and more gloomy as days passed.

Queen Haimavati continued to be critical. The physician summoned an occultist. After an examination of the patient, the occultist looked equally gloomy.

Tanmoy was upset.

At night the queen expressed a desire to speak to her husband alone. The maids went out.

In a voice weak, pathetic but gentle, she said, "My lord, it is time for me to keep my promise. I'm leaving you."

"But, Haimavati, the situation has changed and so has my mind. Please pardon me and don't leave me," entreated Tanmoy.

"I too am not that keen on departing now, my lord, but.." Her voice grew feebler, culminating in a total silence. She closed her eyes. Tanmoy kept sitting near her, ardently wishing her a restful sleep and speedy recovery.

No sound other than the murmur of Varuna, the sweet branch of the Ganga, was heard. A lamp flickered beside the bedstead of the pale queen.

"Maharaj !"

Tanmoy, who had fallen into a state of daze, received a jolt. Never in his life had he been taken aback like that. This was the voice dearest to him till the other day. Now, of course, there was a tinge of sarcasm in the voice.

In the faint light and smoke he could discern the outline of a woman.

"Maharaj, your beloved wife, the princess, rather the queen, is no more !"

"No more ? But what about you, Susmita ?"

"I too am no more. But should you so wish, the queen, I mean her body, would bounce back to life - with my spirit entering it. Look at her. She is so beautiful ! Must you be deprived of this splendour so abruptly ? But the process brooks no delay. This spirit present before you is unable to enter her body without your cooperation."

"What is my function ?" asked Tanmoy, feeling himself under a strange and powerful spell.

Susmita's spirit told him what to do. That was a simple rite.

Tanmoy performed it and soon the queen opened her eyes.

"O Queen !" exclaimed Tanmoy.

"I hate that address !" rebuffed Haimavati as she sat up - or was it not Susmita ? Better to refer to her as the queen.

The queen focused her gripping look on Tanmoy. A brief shiver ran down his spine. But he was anxious to restore normalcy to the situation and took her hand in his.

"So, you got a new lease of life !" he said.

"Who got it - your wife Haimavati or your forgotten lover Susmita ?" the lady sounded harsh.

"How dare you say that you were forgotten, Susmita !" Tanmoy protested.

"Listen, O king, the body you are touching so tenderly is not mine. Hence I, Susmita, have no cause to feel thrilled. Rather I feel tormented, for I cannot ignore the fact that you are caressing Haimavati ! You see her, not me !"

"But, Susmita .."

"Can you address me like that with a clear conscience ? Can you touch your Susmita ? You can't !"

"Why not ? I desire to feel you.."

"But that will only result in your feeling Haimavati ! How can I bear with that ?"

She wept and after a moment's silence, said, "Better, never touch me."

The attendants were delighted at the miraculous recovery of the queen. They were required to camp there for the period of her convalescence. But that was an extremely trying time for Tanmoy. He never forgot that what dwelt in Haimavati's body was Susmita's spirit. But this was hardly the humble Susmita he knew !

It was time at last for them to return home. Two nobles came to escort them back. Tanmoy who had meanwhile got over the state of bewilderment in which the abrupt turn in his life had put him, had resolved to exercise his free will firmly now.

"Let the queen return. I must meet my Guru in the Himalaya before resuming my kingly duties," he told the nobles, who could not protest. The queen looked happy.

"It is the queen who must rule in the king's absence. Be pleased to return as soon as possible so that she does not find her burden too heavy," the nobles appealed to Tanmoy politely.

The queen fell short of bursting into a wild laugh while taking leave of Tanmoy.

The nobles left behind them two members of their entourage for serving Tanmoy. But tanmoy dismissed them the very next day and travelled northward all alone. He was as eager to meet his Guru as he was anxious to leap out of the whirlpool of bizarre occurrences choking him.

On reaching the hermitage of a friend of his Guru at Haridwar, he learnt that Sage Dhiman had decided to spend the winter interned in a cave at Badrikashram, in a state of Samadhi for months at a stretch. When the holy town would be practically deserted.

Winter had set in. It was not possible for Tanmoy to advance further north as the roads were obliterated by snow. He patiently waited.

Coinciding with Sage Dhiman's return to Haridwar after four months, Tanmoy chanced upon two pilgrims from his own land. Their reports shocked him. The queen had become a tyrant and a terror. She had put to execution the Prime Minister, accusing him of murdering Tantrik Chandagauranga and his daughter, Susmita. In her maiden days princess Haimavati commanded so much love and adoration by all who mattered in the kingdom that there was no question of anyone opposing her decision.

But the priest had murmured, saying, "Whatever the Prime Minister did - did if at all he did what is attributed to him - must have been for the good of his king or the kingodm."

"Is that so ?" Haimavati had demanded of him. The priest mysteriously disappeared that very night.

The Kotwal was found guilty of disobedience and was awarded the most painful death - being placed on the spike,. The General absconded before his turn came.

The pilgrims further informed Tanmoy that the General was secretly organising a revolt and the queen had already put a number of nobles to death, suspecting them of collusion with him.

Sage Dhiman, when told of the developments, advised Tanmoy to forthwith return to his capital and take charge of the situation. But before leaving, Tanmoy, who had disclosed to the sage all about his predicament, asked him, "Gurudev, how can Susmita, who was so gentle and wise, behave in this grotesque manner after adopting Haimavati's body ?"

"My boy, what possessed Queen Haimavati was by no means Susmita's soul, but only her vital being, her life-force, an explosive reserve of her desires and passions. The Susmita you knew was so different because her vital being was controlled by her soul. Once dead, her soul went away to its own sphere where it must await an appropriate rebirth. Detached from the soul, her vital being must have come under the influence of some hostile elements It is one's vital being which generally, though not necessarily, wanders about for a while after one's death.

"Gurudev ! Who is to blame for the death of Haimavati ? I feel extremely guilty."

"She had resolved to die at an awfully humiliating moment in her life,

thereby reducing her life-force to a cipher. At the same time either Susmita or one of her Tantrik well-wishers applying some occult destructives on her cannot be ruled out. To wish to die is a sin or at least a spiritual blunder. The hostile element in the atmosphere can cause one much damage while one nurtured that kind of negative will. It was too late when Haimavati, touched by your kindness, wished to live. But, my boy, you are not to blame for her death. Be at peace," said the sage.

"Who or what could have brought about the death of Susmita ?" Tanmoy asked.

"Circumstances. Probably the Prime Minister had a role in it, needless to say, under the impression that his action would put an end to the conflict in you."

Tanmoy hurried to his capital. But, shortly before that the rebels, led by the General, had attacked the palace and the queen had met with a violent death.

The General and his compatriots surrendered to Tanmoy most willingly and were pardoned. Peace returned to the kingodm.

King Tanmoy continues to rule, extremely lonesome though he is.

"Did you understand what I meant by one and half times dead ? Susmita at first died in her own body; her vital being died once again in Haimavati's body," explained Samanta.

Abolkara sat as though under an enchantment.

"Now, my boy, we must resume walking," said Samanta as he stood up.

"Alas, how strange are the unknown laws of fate ! Sir ! Tanmoy, Susmita or Haimavati - none of them had committed any particular sin to begin with. Susmita, no doubt, had tried to manipulate Tanmoy's destiny for her own satisfaction, prompted by her own possessive and passionate love for him. But can her action be branded as sin ?"

"Who are you or I to brand someone's action as this or that, anyway ?"

"Right, Sir. But, is it not a pity that things should go the way they went ?"

Samanta laughed. "Abol! What do you think was my inspiration behind narrating the story to you ? You are in the habit of measuring everything along the simplistic logic of two plus two becoming four. If you see one suffer or another happy, you conclude one having done something evil and

the other something good. But there are causes beyond causes, causes beyond logic, causes beyond our perceptions. One who had never done a wrong might suffer. It is impossible to predict a safe passage for anyone, however holy, through this world teeming with desires, lusts, dreams and schemes; it is difficult to say why someone stumbles or collapses."

"But is it not a fact that no suffering or death could befall one without one's soul's consent ?" queried Abolkara.

"Abol ! Have you realised your soul ? If not, who are you to speculate on that matter ? Remain content with the thesis that it is simply impossible to find a rational explanation for every occurrence. Don't jump to another thesis unless you have truly grown enlightened."

Abolkara nodded, but did not budge.

"Get up, will you ?"

"No inclination for that !"

"Abol, since King Tanmoy has no heir, one day the elephant with the golden pitcher will be out again. But let's wish Tanmoy a very long life. No use your sitting right now, ready to stick out your puny neck and head at the opportune moment.

"Sir, I must confess that the golden pitcher had tickled my neck and head for a fleeting second, but not a wee bit of that sensation has survived my listening to Tanmoy's story."

Abolkara stood up and lifted his master's luggage. Even then Samanta laughed.

"Why this laughter, Sir ?"

"Well, Abol, even if you hear this story a full dozen times, your neck and head, like many a neck and head, would begin tickling the moment you see the elephant out with the golden pitcher," commented Samanta.

Tr. by the author

THE TRANSCENDENT MIRROR

Chaudhury Hemakanta Mishra

Seeing a beautiful woman, watching with charmed eyes the peacock dance of a dazzling coloured saree of floral designs studded with mirror work, near the glass windows of the Khadi-Gramodyoga Bhavan, Surasen, froze on his feet in the populous crowd.

But how will Surasen know that the spot on which he was standing was a point of supra-conscious enlightenment ? And how can he perceive the glory of the metapsychical moment of consciousness crystallized by the ageless perseverance of millions of seers ? How will he realize that once on that spot Surasena is no more Surasena's ?

O'Woman ! Surasena perceives things with crystal clarity through the glass window of your mind. Why don't you imagine the plight of those minds you could have captivated in the mirrored levels of your saree, had you worn it. But you cannot even once whisper in your poor husband's ears, foiling the conspiracy of the ration card and riding over the worldly course of a hundred worries and thousand humiliations that you were fascinated by such a saree. This saree does not have that compelling merit. It is a mere fashion to gaze at a show-window, especially at a Khadi-Gramodyoga Bhavan show case.

Not only the woman, Surasena could even see through the saree. This is the glory of the enlightened moment of consciousness. But he couldn't know why the saree was weeping through the mirror eyes. And the other mirrors which had somewhat faded by the sighs, those beckoned, - Surasena, see.

Surasena had the vision of a tatter-skinned tottering old man, a cap on head, sitting before a pale flickering lamp. Peering through his jute-white beard, like reality tied around by dirty old twine were his spectacles in a stern stance. He is holding this saree in his hands, and weaving countless dream-flowers in a reverie of middle work-flowers in which bloom the gardens of his lost youth. Before his mind's eye appears a morose girl in

tattered clothes, holding a cup of tea. His own daughter whom he had desired to beautify by adorning her with mirrors.

The sighs which have made the mirrors lustreless, had gushed out from his being, shaking his rib cage. The tears which had oozed out of his glass eyes the day his daughter Fatima was married (Alas ! the old man was lonely since that day) the same teardrops have turned into mirrors. Those are now the mirrors on the saree. The saree is weeping those tears.

Surasena further saw in his vision, the saree having been the conch-tune of a rich middle-aged woman's past indulgent regretted, fallen youth, is swimming *suo motto* around fairs and festivities. Alas poor saree ! It should have dazzled some sprightly fifteen year old lass as the loose cover of her green sensibilities. It should have captured in its mirrors the sanguine rising notes beyond distant hills; the greenness of some casuarina groves; the azure rhythms of full-bosomed river, the murky stigma of some village belle ! Alas poor saree ! It is infructuous like the hanging lump of a breast from a goat's neck. It is sheer futility. O woman ! The wheel of time has rolled away. O' woman ! Don't forget that the dazzling resplendence has come only from the wicker lamp of the ripe old man. You are merely blowing the sighs of his dream saree in fairs and exhibitions : O' woman ! O' stone-hearted ! Woman, you do not know that the same old man's fifteen-year old darling standing before this very show-window was tagging at the striped shirt of her lover, and was urging him one day to.... O' woman the world is so mismatched that when there is the ear, the ear-ring is beyond reach; and when the ear-ring is available the ear is wanting.

This is the essence of the point of consciousness. Surasena converged on the point, merged in it. He himself became a point of divine awareness which has existence but no space. Like the countless mirrors on the saree, on that spaceless point too were reflected the three dimensions of time, the three realms, a thousand seas, million streams, innumerable icons, victories and defeats, ringing laughter, the measureless birdsongs and the wavy tunes of perpetual music.

Ah woman ! Stop your voluble eyeshafts. Do you think you can incage that mind ? That mind is the free essence of the conscious point; a part of that vast essence whose frenzied expression are all women of beauty, whose moody brush strokes are all the mazy course of realization.

But the spark of consciousness betrayed anguish in tears. The tears fell on the mirrors of the spaceless point; their sighs clouded the mirror's eyes. The old man's sighs and sobs at the time of his daughter leaving him for her in-law's; the agonized look of Fatima, the scene of a woman holding a ration card and calculating, looking upwards, the scene of a fifteen year old lass urging her lover by tagging his striped shirt; the picture of the lover searching his pockets and cajoling his inability while puffing at his bidi, and the heart-rending confessional of the saree, swimming the fairs and festivities pouring her ill-fated autobiography; and the unconsoled failure of that rich middle-aged woman's ceaseless efforts at perpetuating her salad days-all, as if in a unified measure were reflected on that point. No, no, O'world ! Forgive ! Forgive O'ye supraconscious point ! O'All ye Sages and Seers, unfulfilled souls, you kindly pardon Surasena.

An eyeful of tears welled up in Surasena's eyes.

Tr. by Aswini Kumar Mishra

THE RUBAIT OF NILAMADHABA

Rabi Pattnaik

Omar Khayyam sleeps.

Above, the circular umbrella of the date-palm tree. Below, the prickly shadow of its dissected leaves. Hanging at the tips of stems is Kalahandi (a black pot). The juice oozes. Life's juice. Som juice. Below he sleeps listlessly. Dreamless, indifferent, unresponsive. A living rubai, floats in musical symphony, in the wavy lapping wind.

Banka Saura sleeps facing the canal. On the very bank a few white bones of his mother, cremated seven days ago, dazzle among the black cinders. Nearby sits, rubbing body with body, Somabari - his wife. On Banka Saura's body there is no cover. Only a loin cloth. Vainly trying to cover his maleness, that piece of cloth. Somabari. Her dress is also the same, a piece of cloth. Earthy body. Two big breasts, two desireless Buddha. Calm, resolved. Ambrosia oozes from there. For the benefaction of the universe. For the future of human society. To carry forward creation.

Lonely world. Calm sky. Waveless atmosphere. Soundless, unstirring. No chaos of desires. Presonalityless, desireless, self-surrendered world.

Rubait is alive.

Throwing away many a layer of leafy books, many a cover of rituals and morals Rubait has got back itself, after long days.

But they are asleep. Banka and Somabari. No - they are not asleep-immersed in worldly worries. Rubait is taking birth; born from them the circle of that wave gets large and larger, spreading everywhere. All experience the wave but not its creator. Music is enjoyable, not the musician. But the two are not different. Two manifestations of one unit. One still, undisturbed and passive. The other quick, vibrant, active. Wave and the sea. The sea is not separate from the wave.

Rubait is life's music. It has no value before death. One who is alive, and really lively, only he sings the rubait. That's why this is the language of life. Absolutely of flowing life. Of endless life, in every form returning every time.

Life's river flows.

Banka and Somabari. Ganga and Yamuna. Sacred, consecrated, ambrosial life's moving stream. Hurdle less untied, unforbidden, uninstinctive within the impulsive. Non attachment within attachment. An austere, spontaneous non-attachment.

Somabari arose and stood up. In her rising posture she was fully naked. Banka looked a bit opening his eyes. Again closed his eyes and slept totally indifferently : But I started burning. The Lac-house of my body at the slightest spark of desire started burning in spurts. But why? Why doesn't in my body come the cold abstinence of Banka Saura? Who has enchained my hand, feet, mind, conscience like the African slave of the Middle Ages ? How many rules, prohibitions - the ostentations of socialisation. All routine. Geometrical straight lines. Where is Ganga in my life?

Ganga ?

I have seen the Ganga at Allahabad, Patna, Kolkata.Allahabad's Ganga is Kolkata's Hoogli. Same water names different. Reminded of Ganga many forgotten things come to mind. I remember father's death. The day carrying father's bones in an earthen pot I went bare foot, hair dishevelled, to throw in the Ganga. Below the Howrah bridge. Swampy pigeon-hole like houses. Before that in the open field many sages, beggars, brahmins, barbers crowd. Oriya brahmin, Bihari barber. There too the same competition 'I will do your work with less money. Come to me.' How strange, how disgusting, how irksome. But even in such situations that my father's soul would attain moksa. I had that faith at that age. Bihari barber balded me. (Ah ! what luxuriant wavy black hair I had ! I never wanted to shave off that hair. I sulked in anger at my father- why he died.) Then wrapping an old piece of dhoti around my waist (because that one would be taken away by the barber or washerman), carrying the earthen pot, reciting, some crap of an uneducated brahmin, in that dirty, slushy awful

smelling waters of the Ganga I waded through the mud producing slushy sounds and in one breath entered the water and buried the pot. Oh! how dirty the water was ! Bathing in the flowing waters carrying the stool and urine of the entire city I had to sanctify myself. My entire body rang up in shivering shocks of self - loathing. In that winter morning the mind was unwilling to enter into water. But I had entered. Only for a belief. My father's soul will attain salvation. As if the soul is a man ! Or a disembodied ghost? Strange ! Soul is a consciousness. Why should it stick to a body? And if after death everything is over for man then why should I suffer for it? And if there is rebirth then why should the soul be flying till this time? Why does it sit waiting for a mundane thing? And why does its bones attain moksa bathing in the rotten, poisonous waters of the Ganga? I know my father. Although more than half of his life was spent on the Ganga-banks, he never bathed there. But those questions were not on my mind then. Only one faith was there that father's soul will be released by that. I didn't know what that freedom of the soul was. That belief was not for the good wishes of my father's afterlife - the real source of that belief was my deep love for him in this earthly life ; my affection and devotion. I love him - for that I will do this for his good.

But today I understand. The Nilamadhab of the Sabara couple have opened my eyes. The waters of the melted ice of Gangotri are not the Ganga- not sacred. Ganga's birth is in the mind of man. When man's mental Bhagiratha prays in agony with sincerity, patience and integrity, the sacred stream of divine consciousness spontaneously flows in the selfsame ascetic man's head - in the form of consecrated Ganga. But we do business dealing in Ganga, dealing in the human soul. Something which is a matter of intense personal realisation. We buy and sell it like an object of daily use in our everyday life. We make profits - economic and social.

What meaning does it have when in the present life we could not give pleasure to our father and mother, for them abstaining from normal comforts for eleven days without eating oil and salt, sleeping on the floor, doing penance and suffering discomfort for their salvation in the other world? That other world which is unknown to us, which does not have any certain existence, for that we are prepared to suffer pain but if our old parents

cause a slight disturbance in our present life, we will not tolerate. We will ill-treat them. We will be annoyed while serving them. Silently we will wish for their death.

Really, what is the value of these rituals ? What meaning does the obsequies have ? Throwing some money for the dead men and the greedy, and buying the so-called blessings of a few brahmins by feeding them? Nothing happens. It happens only to us who take credit. For that man the sons spent a lot much on the obsequies. Donated much. But how does the disembodied soul gain ! One who doesn't have a body, for him what is the value of these mundane pleasures, fretting and fuming, anger and pride ? Glorified by our own belief, in our limited intelligence, we think that our father in heaven is very happy. He is blessing us.There is no heaven nor hell. Nothing is . Who knows where he is ? We judge the other world by our own ego: in the name of the departed soul we establish ourselves. Unnecessary false propaganda in the name of duty. A bundle of fake rules and regulations. Dry rituals - blind culture. Life is the only truth. All duties are only for that truth. Every man is responsible for himself. Therefore, if my father has never tried to sanctify himself, I cannot make him pure by donating a lot of money for him. If he was really pure he will be resplendent by the light of his own purity. There is no need for my donating money. Each man's duty is for himself- to improve himself, to make himself great. None else can ever do anything for him.

Lo there, Banka Saura is sleeping. He does not observe obsequies. he does not recognise anything : laws and morals of our society. But does that mean he is not a human being ? He too has a soul. But Banka is purer than me. Because he is not covered by the shroud of hypocrisy. Not black by the darkness of his own pretence. He is free of superstitions. He has learnt to walk only on the squared routes of nature's unassailable laws. Like me, he has not learnt to lose his way making thousand sub-paths and branch-roads. He may be ignorant, may be uneducated, but he too is the worshipper of the same truth. The truth I search for through knowledge, he worships the same truth in his ignorance. Whether he knows or not how does it matter. He does not need moksa. He does not know what moksa is. He recognises only life. He is the perennial worshipper of a living rubait.

But I ? I do not recognise life - nor do I recognise the truth inherent in it. I am a divided disintegrated man. I am not truthful to my body, nor to my soul. I do not speak what I think, I do not do what I profess. In the mutual conflict of thought - speech - action I merely maintain a temporary equilibrium. I haven't got the true connections of life in my search.

So many chains on my body - social ties, handcuffs of culture. The traps of physical lust. Strong poisoned stakes of varieties of idealism. Only for that so much of burning in my body. But how fragile are my corporeal ties. At the touch of pure truth they break into pieces. But I am weak. Cowardly.

I search for life's rubait. But it is unable to come jumping over the fence of seven-layered walls. It beckons me from a distance. The free parrot sings of freedom flying over dales and forests.

His call is from afar. His attraction is intractable. Ah! I want freedom. Freedom I want. Freedom.

Tr. by Prafulla Kumar Mohanty.

LATA

Binapani Mohanty

Somewhere around midnight, Lata left her home and disappeared. No one knew where. It was the full moon night of Holi, with moonlight splashing over the entire village. The deities had finally been brought to the festival grounds after being carried from house to house. Revellers thronged the narrow village lanes. The children had rested a little in the evening, and refreshed, had gone off to the grounds in a spirit of joy. With hidden handfuls of coloured powder they had smeared one another's faces, for the day of Holi could never be the same as the day before. Just once a year, and so hard to get hold of; how it comes and goes in the twinkling of an eye ! And if one did not want to possess it, it seemed as though everything piled up, the grime and dust of the year sat heavy on both body and mind. And it was as if Lata went on smiling, yet inside her the fears of years settled in like ghosts. So on a full-moon festive night like this one, Lata mingled with the crowds, leaving her house to watch the jatra after offering her customary worship.

In the evening she had her fill of rice and water and fried greens. She had spread a mat on the narrow verandah, muttering that she was feeling sick. Her father had shouldered the village deity and left for a distant village in the morning. And here in the house, no one, not even a crow or a koel that she could talk to. When her sister-in-law, Mani, came to ask her over for a game of cards she turned her down saying she was unwell. Mani and the others had gone back. Someone had taunted her from the backyard gate. "Look at her ! There she is, lying like a log but says she is ill. Such lies".All of them burst into laughter and the wanton breeze wafted it away, who knows where. Still, Lata continued to lie flat on her back, staring blanky at the moon. The festivities of the village remained outside her, did not touch her at all. And no one needed to know the inner world she dwelt in, or where her thoughts lay, save herself.

The rhythms of the *mrudang* and cymbals reverberated throughout the village, and the crowds moved here and there with vermilion-smeared faces. Around midnight, without a thought for the denizens of the dark - the jackals and dogs and evil spirits - Lata shut her front door and left, as though for the Holi festivities. And nobody came near her house, nor cared to enquire where she was.

The revelry lasted all night. At daybreak, each one went home to rest exhausted. Who had the time to go anywhere, or enquire about another ? Who cared to find out whether someone had eaten or slept or died even ! Who would be interested in Lata's whereabouts ? When Jagu Behera walked into his house, fatigued, on the after noon of the next day, he turned livid with rage when he saw the lock on the front door. His shouts for Lata were loud enough to be heard in the neighbouring houses, but only their echoes rebounded and struck frenziedly at his chest.

For wouldn't he be mad ? He had sold five plots of his fertile paddy land to marry off his daughter. His son-in-law was handsome as a raja's son, possessed enough land and property, with a lot of mortgaged gold belonging to others. But his daughter didn't live with him for more than a couple of months. Only she knew what had transpired between them. Lata was all skin and bone in a month. She answered no questions, facing everyone with a blank stare, as though she was seeing a human being for the first time. And Jagu thought : here he had brought his daughter up with such love and care; a little inconvenience at her in-laws', and she was in a state. She didn't have a mother who would understand her problems; as a father, what else could he do ? He wasn't a prince who could override her in-laws !

The world was calm and peaceful when the latch on Jagu's front door rattled loudly one night. A thin drizzle fell, a blanket of ominous clouds lay low in the sky, Frogs croaked along the edges of the village pond. A slight chill had made Jagu cover himself from head to foot and go off to sleep. The sudden noise woke him. His queries as to who the caller was brought forth no answer. Telling himself that it was spirit, he turned on his side and went back to sleep. After a time the chains rattled again. Annoyed, Jagu opened the door, then fell back into the darkness, startled out of his wits.

His voice came out faint, halting, through his initial shock, " Lata ! You ! " It

wasn't hard to recognise his daughter in the dark - after all, she was his own flesh and blood.

Lata did not utter a word, but slipped past him quietly into the house. Nonplussed, Jagu asked, "Now, what ? How are you here in the middle of the night ? Did you have a fight with your husband and run away ?"

Lata remained standing, leaning against the wall, her head bowed. It wasn't possible to look into her face. In sheer desperation Jagu Behera slumped to the floor. When he noticed that Lata was making for her room without a word, he began again in a voice full of pity, "Come, tell me the matter. Did your husband or in-laws strike you ? Are you all right ?"

Lata slunk inside quietly, Jagu was sure that his daughter's situation must be intolerable, but things would ease in time, he thought. He didn't have to go into it at this time of night. Had the girl had her evening meal or not ? She had always been an obstinate sort. Jagu felt restless. He found her sitting on the narrow verandah and asked, "Will you eat something ? There should be some rice left." Lata, her head between her knees, burst into sobs, her body racked with pain. She hadn't wept like this even on her wedding day. He bent down to wipe her tears with his rough shoulder-cloth, then fell silent. Time would reveal this grief she wasn't able to bear. Perhaps she was homesick, too. Morning would bring her husband or her father-in-law, Jagu told himself, and then he would give them both a piece of his mind !

But did that happen ? Months passed by, became a year, and still no one came for Lata. Jagu found it impossible to get to the root of the matter, and why Lata had left her husband's house still remained a mystery. She continued to answer any quesitons put to her with blank stares. At times, tears welled up in her eyes, her lips trembled, but she never spoke a word. Jagu was silent too when asked about his daughter. In exasperation he would say that his son-in-law had gone to Madras to look for a job, and when he got one he would come for Lata. But there was no news from anywhere. No one came to inquire. And strangely enough, Jagu Behera never thought of going to Lata's in-laws to find out what the matter was either. The meagre amount of money he earned form his daily wages was just enough for one meal for the two of them. But could Jagu get angry with her ? Sometimes he sulked but forgot his own misfortune when he looked at her face. And who could tell that she wouldn't kill herself ? Or

run away someplace ? Jagu had no one else in this world. Whatever Lata might be, reckless or stubborn, she was his own, and he would suffer with her. That was why Jagu, whose habit it was to mutter to himself all the time, was struck dumb. Tales of all kinds made the rounds in the village after Lata's arrival, and she was the butt of much sarcasm. But Jagu remained locked in his own silence. Come dawn, he would leave for the fields, and at sunset, he would prostrate himself before the gods to show him a way out.

Ah, the girl should be there when he returned, with a bowlful of rice and the door held open. But no, she was probably playing cards in some neighbour's house like an unmarried girl ! How long could he take this ? His impetuous shouts of "Lata ! Lata ! " fell back emptily on his ears. He wandered around from house to house in the village and came back in despair. The doors remained shut, as they had been. Only the shadows spread across the fields. Jagu Behera lay slumped against the verandah wall. He felt exhausted. He remained there all through the night; at daybreak, awakened by the calls of the pheasants and crows, he glanced at the front door : it was shut, as before.

Villagers affirm that Jagu Behera never regained his will to live. Whenever elders came to console him, his lips would quiver, and tears stream down his face, but no sound escaped his lips. Everyone agreed that it was the girl's evil nature that was responsible for his state. And Jagu Behera lay as he was, a lifeless form, for days, before he gave up the world forever. But his eyes remained wide open, as though rivetted to the front door.

Three years have passed since then. Three years since the day of Jagu Behera's death. In the festival grounds three annual fairs have been celebrated, mango trees have shed their fruit and blossomed again, the floodwaters of the river have battered the shores and mingled with the sea. In the meantime, Lata's cousin gave birth to a son and became a widow. Childhood friends scattered far and wide. Still, no one had any news of Lata. Why she had left home, and whether her husband had taken a second wife, no one seemed to know or care. But the sun continued on its daily rounds and the seasons came and went with unceasing regularity. Lata remained a forgotten entity, a useless question mark. From that day Jagu Behera's house stood shut, as though forever. A small one roomed house

with a narrow verandah, and inside, just a tin trunk, a couple of reed mats and some torn sheets. Everyone in the village knew of Jagu's belongings, but not even the poorest of the poor was tempted by any of them. Then again, who wasn't afraid of evil spirits in the dark, especially in an abandoned house ? Even the Jasmine shrub had stopped flowering. Slowly, the shuttered silent house took on a haunted air, and inexplicably, passers-by seemed to hear the loud, drawn out calls of Jagu Behera coming from its livid darkness.

All of a sudden, one day, there was an uproar. Three years had become three long centuries. Events of the past were now vague and unclear. Shouts of "Save us ! Save us, O lord ! " could be heard from people who knew nothing about the incident. For, early in the morning, Lata was seen sweeping the verandah of her hut, with a two-year-old child tagging behind, thumb in its tender mouth. A slight bulge had developed around Lata's waist, her body and face had grown fuller. Still, her two large eyes seemed to be on the brink of tears, as if she would break down at the slightest bruise. News of her return spread like willdfire : Had they heard ? Jagu Behera's wayward daughter had come back ! And with her was a child. Must be hers, or why would she have brought him along ? One who could run away from a handsome husband in the middle of the night, would she have done that without reason ? Age was creeping up on her steadily, and she had realized she couldn't earn her livelihood doing hard labour anymore. So here she was, back in her father's home.

And what a difference there was between the Lata of today and the girl of three years ago ! She seemed so listless and lax. Just stood there, with her head covered with her sari, when village elders questioned her ! When the women folk of the neighbourhood came along, she spread out her torn mat on the floor and stared at them. She kept silent, not reacting even to their playful taunts. Sometimes a smile would flit about her lips, or she would draw rice powder designs on the earthen floor, unmindful of their stares.

Everyone accused her of being a harlot. Let her live the way she wanted to, they said. Who cared what she did ? No one had ever seen someone who had abandoned her husband and then become a mother, act as though she were an innocent ! On top of everything, how arrogant she was ! Was she some goddess that she could do whatever she pleased ?

Transform the unreal into the real so that she could live on with her dreams ? What a shameless hussy ! Couldn't she get hold of a little poison ? Would she be able to live on if she just kept her mouth shut for all time ?

Lata's meagre knowledge acquired from a few years in a primary school, was hardly sufficient to show her a way out of her troubles. Nor did she have a father or a brother who çould be a support to her. Finally the villagers came together and decided that Lata had to leave the village or else they would set Jagu's hut on fire. It was as though her actions had blackened everyone's faces, put their women to utter disgrace. She had to go.

When the villagers crowded around Lata's front door that evening and demanded that she explain her actions, she put the edge of her ragged sari between her teeth and said, "Yes, the child is mine. The day after our marriage when my husband left for Calcutta, my in laws locked me up in a room for 15 days without food or drink; they didn't even look at me ! Somehow, I escaped in the middle of the night, back home to my father ... but father was so distressed the days I was here; he heard no end of people's taunts. And I, I was the butt of much scorn. I can't forget how he laboured day and night to feed me in his old age, yet our hunger remained, the disgrace never left us."

Lata swallowed, pulled the edge of her sari down onto her face and went on, "And I had nothing to tell people, nothing to do. Even death shunned me. I couldn't free my father from his unending labours. Then this cruel world left me with a son and flung me back here."

From somewhere in the group, a middle-aged man suddenly tightened his wash-cloth around his waist and took two steps forward. Lata didn't know who he was. She heard him shout,"What did you say ? Tell us, again ! The world gave you a son, and you couldn't leave him somewhere else but had to bring him here ! Ha! These tight lipped ones have the sharpest tongues ! Go ahead, tell us, whose son is this ?"

Lata hid her face with her sari and sat down, trembling, on the ground. The child's eyes filled with tears which began flowing down his cheeks; sobs racked him, but no sound escaped his lips.

Suddenly, a kick landed on Lata's waist. it was the old mother - in - law of a distant cousin of hers. As she broke into tears, the old woman screamed, "You bitch ! Is there a frog stuck in you throat that you cannot

speak ? Haven't hurt a fly ever, have you ? Yet you weren't able to live with your in - laws, you swallowed your own father alive ! And now you have the cheek to say this is your son, gifted to you by mother earth ! Confess who the father is ! Or else I'll be the one to cut you into two. Don't you know me ? "

The old woman's foot quivered on the poor girl's flesh. Men and women gathered around, enjoying the scene being enacted before their eyes.

Lata's neck twisted and sagged, lower and lower. Her sobs were choking her. Suddenly sparks began to fly from her eyes. It was impossible for her to bear it anymore. The earth wouldn't open up to swallow her even if she wished. Only if she wished, would she live, or if she wished, die.

She'd settle things herself.

Whatever happened then, happened suddenly and quickly. Lata flung off the old woman's foot and stood up. Her face was a mixture of courage and hate, and it was turning a livid purple. Her gaze, stern and full of purpose, swept over the crowd, from one end to the other. With the child whimpering in the crook of her waist, she began.

"So you want to know who the father is ? Here, before you, are all his fathers ! Ramu, Bira, Gopi, Maguni and Naria - maybe three or four others ! How can I say who the father is ? It was the night of the Holi Festival, the revelries were at their height, and suddenly from nowhere, Ramu was throwing his wash-cloth across my face as he lifted me forcibly into the dark. Beside the funeral ground, under the bushes, they crowded around and picked the flesh clean off my bones. My mouth was gagged. But it was easy for me to recognise their faces in the clear moonlight....How can I tell who the father is ? Ask the low-caste Haria who escorted me to Cuttack-all for a few rupees And just to spare my father the indignity, I didn't come back. Even then I kept my mouth shut. But now you ask them, Aunty Let them place their hands on their chests and tell you truthfully who the father is"

The whole atmosphere changed. The old and middle-aged exchanged glances, the young gave knowing smiles. No question was asked and none was answered. Meanwhile, the old woman had flopped down on the verandah, as though spent. Ramu, Bira, Gopi, Maguni and Naria kept their eyes on the ground.

Lata wiped her tears and began sweeping the verandah. The child started yelling, without reason. Lata flung the broom down, cleaned the snot from the child's nose and picked him up. She cuddled him close and mumbled, "Why do you cry, my child ? Ah, my pet, I am there with you. Don't you worry.... Who's there man enough in the world to admit he's your father ? There, there, your mother will take care of you."

What the boy understood, only he knew, for he flew up into the clouds. He stretched his arms towards the moon and broke into spontaneous laughter. Its sound startled the bystanders, and they started to disperse slowly, their heads lowered.

The few jasmines that had blossomed on the bare tree appeared to smile in the breeze. Lata's neighbour, the slanderous old woman, leaned on her stick and hobbled away in silence.

Lata looked around her and spat on the child's tiny chest to ward off the evil eye. Her handsome son had seemed to wither under their gaze ! She would take care of him. She owned the plot of land that had been her father's, and her son would be its master one day !

The earth and sky, as on other days, were still, motionless. And Lata was smiling and weeping at the same time.

Tr by Jayanta Mohapatra

SALVATION CYCLE

Uma Shankar Mishra.

The Master Performer one day came to our street. You must be surprised; thinking, I am perhaps speaking with a mischievous tang, to amuse you! Really he came: His face anguished like the sorrow of a hacked bough lying on the ground in inert embrace, the Great Director was flushed on tears. Lamenting his separation from Goddess Laxmi, his consort in all incarnations, he said:

Far away you are : Do you sense how I, in this earth or clime, in this deep dark rain of night, swelter in flames? Here, none has the lashes of your dark lily eyes to shade my face against the blazing sunlight. None bothers about me. None calls me; none consoles me. All watch the TV; get into a narcotic or alcoholic stupor or read the newspapers, or else go into mid-day siesta and snore on all fours in disgust. Have no respect for gods and deities: do not even utter the name of their epics and scriptures. I must soon go away from here. Please rescue me with the Garuda craft, Goddess Laxmi ! I should have, in my palace royale at my heavenly abode, been dozing off in aesthetic delight listening to Saraswati's symphonic waves of the Veena. Why did I come here flouting your words, Laxmi! Why did you, my two charmers, turn your face away! Speak ! What was my crime !

His wailing caught me on, I said :

Mister God, come to our house. There luxuriate in glamour a few days, and return. There is five star arrangement: Three-in-one, plenty of wine, music and damsels in groups.

Like the things you see in Hindi films.

God laughed in bewilderment, and holding my hand, climbed the steps to the corridors. Eyeing the full splendour of the new lounge said he :

Amazing. Quite a dazzling house. Where from did you extract so

much dough buddy! You seem to be quite a smooth operator !

Bashfully I said :

What a worthless creature am I, God ! You have not seen how the smarties of this city have built palaces like *Indraprastha*. You will be afraid of putting your steps on their floors - such velvety eleven inch thick carpet is spread. But then to forestall the deities and gods from creating trouble, entering their household, they have built mini temples outside the palace and have locked them up.

God said :

Alright, alright. But I can't stay in this concrete jungle. Can't sleep. Arrange for me a one-roomed, cow dung- polished, thatched house. There must be a host of trees and bushes around : Enough birds and squirrels. The lowing of the cows and buffaloes in the air. There I will quietly sit and sing psalms for Jagannath. They say the thirty-three crore angels come to this abode of Jagannath and pay their obeisance to keep their seats intact. Now when my own seat felt like tottering, I came running to the Round Eyes: What; could you follow? If there is a pond or a river near by, much better. The breeze will be caressing. The mind can concentrate.

Fortunately it was not difficult to find out such a place. Forcibly encroaching upon government land, the eleven-acre coconut grove which I have raised, there are two mud walled rooms for the caretaker. Adjacent to them are the cowsheds, for the eight Jersey breeds. Cleaning one of them I put him up there. Touching almost the backside of the mudhouse there is government canal waters. The Destiny Maker said it was fine. I spread a new straw mattress. He slept.

I was somewhat excited that day. The Destiny Maker himself has taken shelter in my house! To my wife, children, neighbours, bosses and whoever I saw in the market place or in the streets, I gleefully described how such a celestial guest has come. Chose to stay in my house. I have million engagements: some inconvenience might occur; yet to refuse odd time guests would have been unbecoming of my social stature. In this street, at least I command some prestige and dignity. In six months my fate has changed. Now I have such a huge building and own three stone crushers and brick kilns. That I was earlier in the goal for a few days; people have

forgotten. Now in the subscriber list for festivals, meetings and feasts I top. Disgusted by their local politics, from heaven has descended a big God. Let him stay for a few days, and eat, drink and be energetic. In extreme joy my three-tier wife that day chewed up twenty-four masala-enriched fifty-six pans. By 9 P.M. the children visited in three theatres, matinee, evening and late shows at a stretch. And the whole family lunching and dining in Oberoi and Taj Mahal enjoyed life. I too went to my particular club and dissolved my consciousness till 3 A.M.

Very late night. About three. Somebody knocked wildly at the wire mesh doors. Fool, uncultured; does not know that there is a calling bell fixed, which when pressed generates heartwarming *jaltarang* notes in the whole premises announcing a caller. When I rose and opened the door, there was God himself in wooden footwear, clad in saffron cloth.

In his eyes and gait a fear. I asked:

What happened; couldn't you sleep in the garden house?

No, no; not that. A great shouting was there. Heard women wailing. Again on the Canal Road about two - three hundred, holding torches and flashlights are running towards that deoder girt huge building. Before and after them fifty - sixty cars are blaring their way through. Police vehicles too are going. The matter is not clear. Won't you find out!

Waving a sign for the Destiny Maker to keep quiet I lifted the phone. Police Station. Some Havildar picked the phone. Said: No trouble sir! Bhakta Bandhu Saheb passed away. Radio and TV people, Pressmen, Officers, Ministers, moneyed men, Industrialists and Mill owners are all running there to have their last darsan. For us policemen such times are death. If great men die at odd hours, it is irksome to control the stream of callers. Again, the security of the V I Ps, that too at 3 am in the morning!

I explained the position to God. But he stood like a fool staring with wide-open eyes as if he understood nothing. Said:

I thought some Menaka, Urbasi or fairies were dancing courtesan fashion somewhere, and those people, like in our heaven, were running raising hellfires ! But a man dies means, his family and clan will weep and wail or console the widowed wife and the orphaned children: Why should

so many people go in a triumphal march to create confusion there ? As if a man died for the first time in the world!

I invited him to come with me if he found it difficult to conceive of the fact. He will see in his own eyes what happens and how. I too got ready to go there. He asked me:

Why should you run there so late in the night?

I said:

My name will be off the list if I do not go. The names of those who had surrounded the great man in his deathbed will come out in the papers. Will be flashed on the Radio and TV. Otherwise don't you think, they will say an accomplished citizen like me couldn't offer even a floral tribute - How will my business prosper if I am not counted by the heavy brass?

Seating God in my jeep I drove towards the mansion of Bhakta Bandhu Samanta. He, as if whispering in my ears, uttered each syllable in a singsong manner:

The people here, invest even dead men in give and take, trade and commerce! What brilliance of mind; what business acumen!

The Grand Old Man is supine not on a bed of arrows; but on velvet pillow and mattress in the middle of the courtyard. On his whole body is heaped, like a hillock, flowers and camphor garlands. Around the body in state, people move in a queue, bowing and offering flowers and then go out the side road. The ant line is long; the police on alert guard, straightens the queue. In the concourse of suit and tie, safari, wavy dhoti kurta, a vast and variant display of sarees, coiffures and exciting perfumes of exotic smell, the lean, fair and bare bodied Destiny maker wearing wooden shoes cranes his neck through the crowd and ogles wide-eyed at what is happening in the courtyard. Clad in a short Ranapuri *gamcha* tied to the back, he looks so comical that half the crowd is looking at him and fighting a smile. As the man had come with me I was embarrassed. I was getting angry. Said :

Where is your silk and diadem; do gods take city tours in this fashion? Are you not ashamed?

God did not turn to me but answered:

Whatever dress and decor should there be, I see in your city, the dead are amply dolled up in them. See how, spruced up in silk dhoti and raw silk top gear Bhakta Bandhu is sleeping. What do I need to wear! I am Laxmi forsaken destitute, you know!

Suddenly the suppressed hubbub increased. The police force became more alert. Through the crowd a path was cleared pushing the crowd apart. An articulate sensation played over. The Chief of Administration and the Governor have come. Behind them with two large copper trays are walking two bodyguards carrying embrace-thick garlands. And behind them a bevy of beautiful, comely, bulky and women defeated in their attempt at arresting age. Again, self-styled servants of the people, reformers,actors, film stars, writers, poets all, are advancing toward the body of the mighty, lying in state. One after another, they bend over the body, offering garlands, bouquets and *khadi* thread garlands. They bow and bend. The erstwhile smiling faces hypocritically turn ashen and tearful. To the right, about hundred and fifty yards away a group of traditional musicians has already started prayer *kirtan*. The atmosphere overflows with the spirited music of the drum and cymbals.

From this side entered four-five press photographers. Flashing bright light they were busy taking pictures of chosen persons paying obeisance to the dead. If the pose and posture do not rhyme with the mood, they direct and train the posers and take pictures, made to order. They even reluctantly cajole the posers to bring the expression of sorrow and pain in their faces, when the light flashes. Some newsmen have started taking interviews. God, standing near them, listens in rapt attention. Distinguished individuals were asked one by one :

Now that Bhakta Bandhu Samanta, the high priest of this state's culture and politics has left the mortal world, how will you and the people of the state make good this great loss?

The answering VIP wiped off his tearful eyes with his kerchief:

This void is irreparable. In the freedom movement he was our leader. A trusted disciple of Gandhijee. I feel orphaned. In effect, I am now the only inheritor of his literary talents, culture and ideals. If I can, I alone can fill the void.

A burst of appreciation from the surrounding sycophants. But, after a while realizing that in this moment of sorrow it is not proper to give a rejoicing clap, they controlled themselves. Another leader spoke:

You see; Bhakta Bandhu Babu was a practical person; was never satisfied doling out advice or delivering speeches only. He had three, five star hotels run by his family relations. Had established two prominent newspapers. Although he was collecting his regular monthly booty from ministers, officers and industrialists in the name of social welfare, if the occasion so demanded, he used to write against them according to his conscience in his paper. Fearless, non-attached personality!

Question to another:

How are yc J grateful to him?

Was a very good man saar ! whoever approached him for a job or a transfer, he used to get the work done, accepting only a token of gratitude. Was expert in all kinds of prowess saar : money, power, culture and politics. His name brought shivers down the spines of politicians, officers, teachers, dancers, shady characters and even murderers. He treated them all equally with cold neutrality. The Treasury Bench, Opposition, turn coats, everyone had work with him.

Ask me! I will speak the right thing. Who knows him more than I? A voluble, slightly fat, and very stylishly turned out woman, almost rode over the reporter. Somebody whispered in the reporter's ears that she was the third wife of the renowned engineer, Samuel. Always at the forefront in all meetings, conferences and receptions

How far, to what percentage were

You intimate with Bhakta Bandhu ?

I may speak with emphasis: hundred percent. Who does not know in the whole state, how close I was to him? When alone with me he would always say, how I was the only inspiration behind all his good work. The one and only inspiration: you understand? He wouldn't go anywhere without me. Only for him all officers and the police were afraid of me. There is no bureaucrat who can ever deny me a thing. I am close to him since I was eighteen!

In the face of the lady, there was a lustre of victory.

Question: Really, it is like this! To serve the country with full energy, he had renounced worldly bondage; did not marry. How is it then, a beautiful consort like you became so very inevitable?

Answer: O Vile! You dare ask such an awkward question because he is dead. Is it not? What hasn't he given you? Do you think I was going to marry any one else? Or, could he stay away from me? Only because of an inconvenience, when people started gossiping, on his insistence Samuel saheb married me.

The pressmen laughed : blustering, came her husband, Samuel.

What all are you speaking ? Are such things revealed to the Press? Please excuse me: before you print please edit it. I will talk to you later.

Meanwhile the lady took out her mirror from the parasol in utter nonchalance and was busy surveying her arched brows, lips, the powered nose, and the naughty curl lingering on her forehead; burnishing the edges. When the camera flashed, she laughed. Her shapely teeth were magnificent against the backdrop of dead Bhakta Bandhu's closed ashen eyes. Like a pampered child she asked :

Where is the TV crew? I rang up since an hour. At least this must be on tomorrow's evening news.

And like magic entered the TV crew at the very moment and reaching the body with a huge camera and equipment, got ready for action. God could hear the hushed conversation of four or five sorrowing women who were moving toward him:

Is this Black & White or Colour camera? Had I known it would be colour TV I would have worn my sea blue pearl set. Can you do anything in this hurry! Sigh!

Now the TV camera is shooting. The gathered leaders have already dusted their dress to advantage and have selected their vantage points around the body. The shot sequence is being organized by the director. Some social workers and women suddenly threw themselves on the dead body of the great man as soon as the camera started shooting, and started wailing. But for the focus adjustment of the camera angle, they were asked to pose

once again embracing the corpse. The TV crew was breathless with the rehearsals and final take.

God was lost somewhere in the human sea. Now his milk-honey complexioned lean frame is visible. As if he is orbiting round in short circles a few human arrays. In the middle was standing the stalwart Shankar Mishra, wearing an expensive white safari. Tall, copper body, gleaming eyes in a sleepy stance. Capable man, can do and undo things. Why mine alone, he has done work for many a businessman. Can enter everywhere. No scruples. Playboy, flashy. Encircling him are the renowned women of the city, not exactly young, but coquettish, hair-dyeing socialites. Some amusing thing is on: rhythmic laughter wafting about. Now the cortege will move. The bereaved and sobbing citizens will chant, "God is truth" and wish for the great man's soul to rest in peace. On the face of Shankar Mishra, suddenly there is a spot of cloud ? Right when the body was raised on the bamboo frame, it was seen that Shankar Mishra was shouldering one leg. But after the TV shots were taken, he was not to be seen. At that time, it was not easy to understand why God was watching the movements of Shakar Mishra intently and was getting surprise after surprise. I told him:

This business is over. Let's go.

While pulling the hand of absent-minded God, I saw Shankar Mishra again coming this side. Shaking my shoulders he said:

Sir, you must have heard of my misfortune. My wife Menaka, passed away. Your feet did not adorn my house. But tomorrow is her *Dasaha* (Tenth Day) . The head of the state, administrative heads, important citizens, film stars and journalists are coming. Have received about one and half thousand condolence messages; telegrams. I am xeroxing the replies. Please do come definitely. And bring your this friend with you. He seems to be quite an interesting person. My invitation stands.

Before Shakar Mishra moved away, came running a journalist. Looking at God's face, he asked :

Young man! We interviewed a few VIPs. But according to our principles the opinions of one or two common men should be recorded. I will ask: You will answer. He held the tape recorder close to the face of

God in a slanting position. Speechlessly God looked at the machine in fear:

Don't fear! Your name too will appear in the newspapers. What's your name?

God was silent.

O.K. let it be a secret. Such a great man died; how do you feel?

I feel a bit chilly right now.

No, not that- this man who died, by that, has the country gained or lost?

The population fell short by one. During the day there must have been some increase and some decrease. We will know when full figures are available.

My God! What does it mean? Is there no impact on the minds of the common men of this death?

Time is eternal; the universe is vast.

Which line does not fade here?

Go home and sleep.

The Miracle Performer ran and was lost in the void. We followed him.

Next day exactly at seven in the evening, in the same Ranapuri *gamcha* and wooden sandals, God came, knocked at the door and said:

Get ready, we shall go to attend the tenth day *Dasaha* feast of Shakar Mishra's wife.

I was surprised. The gods are so greedy for food!

About hundred and fifty motor cars were parked in front of Shankar Mishra's quarters. The entire area was like a dreamland in electric lamp decorations. At the gate, Shakar Mishra himself was present in dazzling silk Kurta and Churidar, greeting the guests with smiles. A vast exhibition area was decorated in a variety of coloured cloth and sophisticated zari work. God was immersed in it. There were about hundred and fifty exhibits of photographs and oil portraits. All of Shankar Mishra's wife and their family. Somewhere his tall, dark tanned wheat skinned yet laughing wife is garlanding national leaders, elsewhere serving food to social leaders, or singing, or playing the veena, dancing Odissi on stage, playing with children or frolicking even with her husband or friends. In some frames she is enjoying a joke

with film stars or the chiefs of the state. And in some picture looking at the sky with her long tresses flowing like a lovelorn maiden, etc.

In a corner of the exhibition tent there is a large crowd. There, on a large TV set a three-hour Video film cassette on the activities of the dead Menaka, right from marriage to her last days, is the attraction. The letters written by Menaka to her husband and to the distinguished persons are also on display. On the other side of the tent the music concert began. Selected *bhajan* and *gazal* singers have come. They sing to the specifications of the gathering. The young men and women crowded there. In the dining area, arrangements have been made for five hundred persons to sit at a time. *Mahaprasad* has been brought from Puri. Variety of sweets, special puddings and fares aplenty. People come and go in thousands. Here too photographs are taken when VIPs come and go. Here too press interviews are going on. In great amusement and eagerness God is making rounds. And at the place where a jasmine garuda tower has been raised, standing there like a post, God laughs in unbridled joy. Obsequies are going on. in what great style really !

I was about to call him for dinner. Shankar Mishra eyed me to a different area. Indicated that this was the traditional *Prasad* of the tenth day. But as per the tastes of distinguished people separate arrangements have been made in the guest room behind the house. Let your saffron clad friend eat the *mahaprasad*; we go to the guest room.

God somehow could guess. Coming straight to Shankar Mishra and looking at him with piercing eyes, spoke in a fairly bold voice:

I too will go where you are going.

We two were stunned. Impossible to say a straight no! Yet in that swanky affair how will this outfit of God go? There was no time to think. Thumping his wooden shoes God had already reached the doors of the pleasure den. As he parted the screen, all the insiders, lords and ladies looked at him in mortification. God, however, entered the room in great style. Shankar Mishra and I followed.

Before Shankar could finish,"Let me introduce". the wheat skinned dame in jeans and loose shirt, swaying without cause, came sharp holding her glass, and fell on the lap of God girding his neck by her arms. The rest ten or twelve guests present, clapped. And three or four women, who were

flirting with the others in semi-nude gear, came running before him: said in a chorus:

We were waiting for you handsome!

By then the wheat skinned girl, sitting on the left thigh of God in delicate poise was making him drink from her half empty tumbler and God's eyes were reddening by degrees. Suddenly, God, pinching her cheeks and raising her neck and face, addressed Shankar Mishra and said :

What do you see! Do you recognize her? See soon!

She has come; will go away again. Your dead wife.

Has Shankar Mishra gone wild! He ululated:

Whence you came again Menaka! How have you come? I don't remember, how I returned home that night. With God, that girl too disappeared from there; how, no one knew.

For a week there was no trace of Him. Then suddenly, one day in dusky hours the caretaker came rushing and reported that the tall fair man who was staying in the garden house, came back last night and is now sleeping on the edge of the canal. Does not respond to calls or shakes.

By the time I reached, there was no life in him. But the Great Soul had a letter stuck under one wooden sandal. It read:

Knowing that the police will harass you when a corpse is found in your backyard, I kept this in writing. In your city, death has much more romance and fascination than life.

I therefore decided to die here.

My children, make merry.

Tr by P.K. Mohanty

DISSONANT MUSIC

Debraj Lenka

The bullock cart is grinding its way through the dark road as the lantern in its axle sways to and fro.

Through the thick curtain of black and dense darkness that seems to have absorbed the whole world, the cart is prodding on. What goads this man to dare into darkness all alone, without waiting for the morning sun?

The only hope of this lonely helpless bullock cart is the misty flickering flame of the lantern, shimmering in the wind, like the hiccups of a dying man.

Disturbed from their silent sleep, the trees, leaves and boulders on the road stare at the cart with eyes and ears wide open.

The bullocks, poor things, stagger on.

Ups and downs. Stones and boulders. Noisy bumps of the cart loaded with sacks of paddy.

The cart moves on, miles and miles through the forests, orchards, canals, ponds and cremation grounds.

The bullocks teeter forward.

The crackling cart tears through the silent night, as the mango and blackberry trees shiver by its rustle that pervades all around, beyond the roads.

The piteous crinkle of the lonely cart sounds like a desperate cry for a morsel of food, for survival.

An owl whimpers on the top of a tamarind tree and flies off, fluttering its wings violently, threatening to break the tree.

" Baya ! "

" Yes, dad. "

" Are you scared, my son?"

"Yes," he utters haplessly, like a small flower withering away as soon as the petals open out. like the feeble chirping of a small bird at the sight of a hunter.

" Don't get frightened. It was only an owl. With these bullocks and crores of gods whom they carry, ghosts and evil spirits would never dare come near us."

" Won't this road end, dad?"

" Yes, of course. Look at that star. As soon as it moves over our head, we will reach our place."

The night lingers on, as the plaintive noise of the hedgehogs continues unabated. The wheels of the bullock cart slog on, swaying left, right, left right, in slow rhythm in contrast to the feeling of loneliness that intensifies as the night advances.

" Why don't you sing a song?"

" Shall I?"

" Yes, singing reduces distance."

Baya looks ahead. The two bullocks plod on through the pitch-dark road that seems unending. If the load of the cart kills one of the bullocks on the way! Dad is walking with the whipping stick. His bearded face is invisible in the darkness. If, in this darkness, he dies of snake - bite!

Baya's heart is now filled with sadness that descends from nowhere.

All on a sudden, Baya remembers this song and begins to sing in his child-like voice.

On reaching the fourth stage of life
Diseases will set in
Cold and pneumonia, fits and biles.
The voice will turn hoarse
And oh, the decaying bones!
Life will run out of the body
As it is dragged to the cremation ground
And pieces of large wood would be arranged
By the clan and the friends and the family.

On the right side of the road is the blazing flame, flaring higher and higher with the cracking sound of the bamboo, and the frightening cry of the jackals.

Baya's nose almost splits with the stink coming out of the blood -red flames, and he suddenly stops singing.

"Why did you stop singing?"

" What's that fire?"

" Which one?"

" That one rising high into raging flame."

" That's nothing. You better look ahead."

"But what's that fire?"

" Why do you look that way? Why don't you think of the *bhajan* you would like to sing?"

" Is that the cremation ground, dad?"

" Oh no. Why do you think like that?"

" Is a corpse burning?"

" Would you stop bothering about that? Why don't you sing?" Baya's tongue is parched. He feels disturbed and frightened. The song gets stuck in the throat. He lies down on the sacks. But the flames haunt him, as if the tongues of the flame stretch out to devour him.

They will place the body over them
Without any mercy whatsoever
Face down, hands and feet
Shall crack by the fire.

Baya closes his eyes, and feels as if a dark figure is sitting on the top of a tree, with hair dishevelled, eyes winking, and laughing teasingly with all the teeth exposed.

The flame he saw at the cremation ground seems to pursue him. Now it burns in front of his eyes, within his heart and deep inside his mind.

Baya finds this night, this road, so awkward. He is frightened. In this pitch-dark night, where one can't see another's face, if someone clings on or jumps onto the cart, what will Baya do?

The whole of Baya's consciousness is now centred on the flames. His heart throbs.

The cart is climbing uphill. There's an open field ahead. The bullocks are already showing signs of weariness.

Raghu Pradhan is steering the cart into right path.

Bushes on either side of the road stand like ghosts wearing the darkness of night.

"Baya, ho Baya, have you gone asleep?"

"No," Baya says.

" You have stopped talking. Why are you silent? Are you hungry?"

"No."

" You are lying. You must be feeling hungry. Untie the corner of your *gamcha*. There's flattened rice, jaggery and *muan*. (A ball -shaped preparation made from sweetened roasted rice, widely used as a snack by the rural poor.) Eat them. As soon as you reach home, you will take the steaming rice your mother must have cooked for you."

Mother! Baya's eyes got wet. " Will she be waiting for us, dad?"

"Yes, of course. Does she ever sleep without feeding you?"

Baya could clearly see, from that long distance, the house in front of which are three or four drumstick plants, a few papaya trees, a guava tree, and a woman reaching on the doorway, gazing steadily at the road, unwearied and sleepless. Poverty-stricken, with a body covered with ochre clothes and seasoned with hard work, with no zest for life, not even the urge to put vermilion on the forehead, with a sacred thread tied round the upper left arm and a bunch of brass keys hanging from it, thick glass bangles on the arms, a neem stick on the nostril-hole, unoiled hair, dry and dishevelled : Baya visualises his mother waiting, with unwinking eyes, for her son. Baya's young mind is now full of pity for his mother who does so much of hard work, all for the happiness of husband and son.

She cleans the cowshed of the landlord, washes utensils and clothes, sweeps the house. And then, she cleans her own goat shed, sweeps her house, washes utensils, collects cow dung to make fuel-cakes, collects firewood, cooks rice, and at night, takes Baya on her lap and tells stories. Baya feels comforted, gets lost in the warmth of his mother's lap, amidst the imaginary land of the princess.

Raghu Pradhan is sitting on the bullock cart and steering it through. It's the landlord's paddy he is carrying, from his land and granary twenty miles away from his village. The landlord has acres and acres of land, within the village, outside the village. The granary is so overloaded with paddy that nobody bothers about the huge amount eaten away by the mice.

While for Rupei, Raghu Pradhan's wife, every grain of paddy is like a grain of gold, there's hardly any concern for all the wastage of grains that the mice eat away in the landlord's granary.

There's water all over the sea, but there isn't a drop to drink!

There's paddy everywhere, but Raghu Pradhan has no food to feed his family! He is the chief labourer in the landlord's household. It's he who brings paddy from the store, sells it and collects a large amount of money

for the landlord. The dust from the paddy causes cough and sneeze, and his body turns grey. He sweats heavily. His voice fills the air of the courtyard as he loudly calls out one, two, three, while measuring paddy. That's his job : to produce and measure paddy, ignoring all the pain on his waist and back. It's his job to drag and lock Goddess Laxmi in the storeroom of his landlord.

He survives on rice-brewed water. In his own house, there's no food, there's nothing. That's his destiny.

His house is empty. And in that empty house, Rupei shines like a noon, and on her lap is Baya.

Baya came to her lap ten years after her marriage, after a lot of entreaties to a number of gods and goddesses. Baya is now ten.

Though God has not given them wealth, he has given them this Baya. His face pleases them, consoles them. His smile is money, pulses, paddy, everything for them.

" Dad!"

" Yes".

" Is there no end to this journey ?"

" Why do you get impatient ? It's you who insisted on coming with me. You would like to see places, you said. And now you are so impatient !"

" I feel drowsy."

"O: K. Lie down on the sacks."

Baya lay down on the sacks.

What could be the time at this hour of the night? The pale grey moon is hardly able to pierce through the dense darkness.

The bullock-cart is grinding on. The bullocks are already tired. They are dragging themselves machine-like. They would have been asleep but for the weight of the cartload of paddy that forces them to keep awake.

Raghu Pradhan is more than forty now. All his hair has turned grey. His strength is waning. Rupei, too, is losing strength and energy. A bunch of hair around her ear has started greying.

One day both of them will tumble down.

Is there no end to this journey ? He has already crossed more than forty milestones on this road, stumbling and struggling all the way. This path of life is like the hot bed of river Baitarani. And he has been dragging himself on, carrying with him so much of anguish, pain, poverty, sorrow, frustration and despair.

But the journey does not end.

On this barren, shadeless and thorny path is a little flower that smiles. It's only for Baya, for his future, that he slogs on.

Sign of a village. Flickering light in that dense darkness from inside someone's cottage.

Raghu Pradhan mildly whips the bullocks to plod along. This poor boy has not taken any food since afternoon. The flattened rice and jaggery he has been carrying are, after all, no substitute for rice, At home his mother would certainly have collected a banana or a guava or some berries from some where. What if there's no rice at home. God has given fruits on the trees.

A poor man's child who has been struggling against hunger from his very birth! A poor man's child who hardly knows the taste of milk or porridge!

Raghu Pradhan heaved a long sigh, It's a matter of another two to four years, which isn't much of a time. Baya will be ready to work as a lobourer. Both father and son will earn, and then who else but they would enjoy all that earning !

The loaded cart is shrieking, or is it weeping ? The bullocks are hunching up. Raghu Pradhan is sweating profusely. His body aches as he drives the cart.

Baya has turned mute.

The cart slogs on.

Raghu Pradhan's flower of hope is asleep.

God alone is the succour in this darkness. But where is God? God alone can steer us through this dark and lonely path. But where is God ? It's God alone who can save us from tigers, bears and snakes. But where is God. ?

Where are you, Oh God ? Are you asleep somewhere so that you won't see the suffering of father and son ?

The lantern has turned smoky. It's getting darker and darker. Is the kerosene exhausted ?

The cart can't move up the slope. It's as if it would come to a standstill.

Won't this road ever come to an end ?

Raghu Pradhan whips the bullocks. Damned fools ! Suddenly, yes, all at once, it happened out of the blue. What exactly happened ? What fell down from the cart ?

Raghu Pradhan shouted, " Baya, O Baya, why did you leave me alone ?"

In the darkness of that night, a human child is groaning under the wheels of the bullock cart, groping desperately for life.

The cart ran over Baya's stomach within twinkle of an eye.

Baya wriggled on the bare earth, like prawn in a dry place. And he was forever lost to his father, lost in the middle of the journey.

Open the door .... Open the door !

Who's that?

I am Raghu Pradhan. Please open the door....... my son, my only hope, has left me forever.....

People in the village woke up. Who's shouting at midnight ? My world's crumbled .... My world's destroyed....

What's the matter ?

People began running about. The cart is standing on the road.

The bullocks are standing in silence. A little distance away, a child is sleeping, clutching the earth with his hands. In the feeble light of the lantern, his face looks distorted. There's the vomit of blood all around. The wheels have almost cut the stomach into two.

Raghu Pradhan lifted the child and embraced him, shouting like a mad person.

Hey, Old man!

Yes !

What do you plan to do now?

Raghu Pradhan violently pulled his hair and shouted, " How can I go home with empty hands ? What shall I say to his mother? He is her eye, her life!"

"Don't you have any other child ?"

"No. He was everything for me. Oh, my Baya!"

Old man! For him, the journey has ended. What's the use in thrashing your head?

Oh, yes. He was all the time asking about the end of the road!

Will you carry the corpse? But what's the point? There's the police station on the way. They will ask you a hundred questions.

Raghu Pradhan couldn't decide.

Since he is no more, what's the point in carrying him home? Can he hear his mother's words?

Raghu Pradhan beat his head on Baya's chest. "Rupei" he wailed.

Don't be impatient. Listen to us. One who dies is gone forever. He will never come back.

Raghu Pradhan looked blankly at the faces of people who implored him to carry the corpse on his shoulder.

Where shall I take him?

Do you see that river? Float him down the river. Yes, carry the corpse on your shoulder and ....

" Oh, my dear! " Raghu Pradhan caressed Baya's head. He stood up slowly, lifelessly, and carried on his shoulders, not a sack of paddy, but his dearest possession. Baya's head swung down his shoulder.

The corpse of the son on the shoulders of the father!

The barren trees are looking on in silent stupor.

In the faint moonlight, four or five villagers are guiding Raghu Pradhan to the river.

Why did it all happen? What did Baya gain in the business of life?

Raghu Pradhan came to carry paddy... and what did he actually carry?

Oh Rupei ! Raghu Pradhan feels as if she is pulling him back. He is walking on, like a machine, embracing the child against his chest. It's as if the hearts of father and son coalesce. If only the father's heartbeat could be transmitted to the child!

The shoulders that once were warm with the child's breath are now cold with Baya's head hanging down.

Raghu Pradhan can't even cry. He has turned into a stone. He is only a puppet in the hands of destiny.

The river is now visible. The water looks pale in the faint moonlight.

"What are you waiting for? Here's the river. Throw that corpse into it, the villagers say.

Poor Raghu Pradhan turns himself into a stone and throws his own heart into the river.

Raghu Pradhan watches, with his stony eyes, the corpse abruptly sinking down, never again to appear on the surface.

But the two or three pieces of *muan* that were tied to his *gamcha* are floating along the river stream. Raghu Pradhan stares at them, at Baya's *muan*, at his son's *muan*. A helpless father cries his heart out at the pathetic sight of his son's *muan* floating away.

Two soft palms had held those pieces of *muan*, and a small mouth had savoured their taste.

He was his soul. His wealth.

"Baya..." Raghu Pradhan cries out.

And from the depths of the river, Baya seems to respond. Dad, oh dad, pick me up from water. I am drowning. Help me out. Ah, you are so cruel, so stone-hearted. Why did you throw me away into water? Would my mother ever throw me into water midway through the journey? I am not dead. I am alive. I am floating along with my *muan*.

"Rupei!" Raghu Pradhan moans loudly, "our world has crumbled down!"

It's you who have destroyed your world. It's you, my father, who threw me away into the river!

"Baya..." Raghu Pradhan shouts as he tries to reach out to the floating *muan*," Leave me alone. Let me catch my dear Baya!"

Men around Raghu Pradhan hold him back from running into the river.

The stone on the river bank that has been a mute witness to so much agony and sorrow and suffering suddenly turns warm.

Streams of blood from Raghu Pradhan's head gush down the stone, and swim along the river banks, pursuing his son's corpse, and wailing, "Baya, O Baya!"

Tr. by Jitendra Narayan Patnaik

FUMES

Purnananda Dani

" What's it?" my eyes asked as I took them off the files and looked at Sanatan, the office attendant.

He had been standing beside my table for quite sometime.

"Someone has come to meet you, Sir" he replied and the way he uttered 'someone' without any respect I knew that it was not anyone important, at least non a babu in his eyes.

"Who's it?" I asked

"He was working here in this office a long while ago... as a peon. I know him. His name is Chaita Munda."

"What does he want?" I queried

"He wants to meet you, Sir" Sanatan replied.

I looked at the files stacked on my table waiting to be cleared with my comments. I had joined only a month ago as the officer in charge of this section and the entire month had been spent in studying the files! The pressure of work was such that I was disinclined for small talk. But sometimes some colleagues would come over for *chitchat* and a lot of time would be frittered away. Finally I would get rid of them taking the plea of urgent work. Of course, it did not happen everyday but whenever they came along I would sit there fixing a smile on my face just for the sake of courtesy.

A former peon in this office? I could have easily refused to meet him. But I thought he must have some urgent work. When officers are wasting so much of my time why can't I spare sometime for this fellow, I thought and asked Sanatan to send him in.

Parting the curtain a diminutive old man stepped into my office room. He was dark as the night, the bristly hair on his head had gone white and there was a staff in his right hand-man's prop in the fourth stage, the old age! A

tattered dhoti barely came down to his knees and the dirty brief that covered the upper part of his body had so many holes that it seemed as if black flowers had bloomed on a white canvas. Age had eaten him up more than it should have and his careworn face was a picture of misery. I was eyeing him intently when he entered my room. "You're Chaita Munda, aren't you? I asked.

Before replying he lent his staff against the table and bowed before me.

" Okay...okay, don't bother... that's alright. Now tell me what's your problem?"

He leaned on the staff and folding his hands in deference said, " Huzoor, you're our god. It's upto you to give me life or death Huzoor. I am Chaita Munda. About eleven years ago I was working as a peon here. One day my officer-saheb told me that I had worked for a long time and so should be pensioned off. After a few days I lost my job. The saheb told me that although my job was gone I would get pension. Some papers were prepared and my signature was also taken and I was promised pension. But, huzoor, I am yet to receive any pension. I have been long on hope. I have run to the clerks here, many a time. They tell me that papers have been sent and I would get my pension. I have brought them betels, tea and other refreshments. But now they get irritated when they see me and are shooing me away from a distance ! I find no word to describe my misfortune. In the last eleven years I have lost two members of my family. Five/six years ago it was my wife who died; last year typhoid claimed my only son. He was hardly twenty three and was not married. In fact I had no money to get him married. He was my support. I fully depended on him. Now I am left with a daughter. She is hardly seventeen. She is my provider now. She works as a coolie and whatever she earns is just about enough to keep the wolf from the door. I could not marry her off, too. I am totally hard up. If only I could marry off my daughter I would die in peace. I have no land, huzoor, just a thatch over my head! I had a lot of hope from this job; but the pension eludes me still even after so many petitions. I am a poor tribal, huzoor. Please take pity on me. I have heard that the government is doing a lot for the tribals. But huzoor I grew old working for the government, yet I have not got the pension. You are my God Sir, the arbiter of my destiny, now you decide" he trailed off. Perhaps he was not in a position to say any thing more. Emotion had choked his voice and his eyes had brimmed over.

He was out of breath and in a dither. I asked him to sit on the stool and told Sanatan to bring some water for the old man to drink.

I had not yet come across Chaita Munda's file among the mountain of files piled up on my table and so knew nothing about him. After listening to his story my heart became tender with compassion. I felt like handing over a fiver or a tenner to him, but he was a peon and I was an officer! There was a gap between us and it stood in my way although my humanity rapped me for losing out to my conceit.

"It's okay 'Chaita. I have heard you out. Now you may go. I shall take out your file and go through it. I will definitely do whatever is possible. You may come back after four/five days." I told him.

"Sure, Huzoor. When I have already come here so many times I can definitely come here again. In fact why once, I can come here fifty times! But shall I get my pension, Sir?

"We will do all the paper work. I don't see any reason why you should not get your pension. Anyway please come back after a few days".

He bowed to me and left.

I leaned back in my chair for a while and then asking Sanatan to bring me a cup of tea I called for the dealing clerk. A little later Rudramohan babu, the pension dealing clerk came into my room.

"Rudra babu, Let me have Chaita Munda's file; I want to study it," I said.

Rudramahona babu nodded and hung his head; he was about to say something when I stopped him and said- " Let me study the file first." He left.

One and a half hour later Sanatan brought Chaita Munda's file and kept it on my table. " It's Chaita's file sent by Rudra babu"" he said.

In fact there were two files grown fat with all the correspondence over the years. Eleven years' chronicle ! Nay, the distressing notes of Chaita Munda's pitiable life!

I had no time to read them in the office; so I took the files home planning to read them at night.

That night around half past eight I opened the first file after having my dinner. Chaita's story here ran to almost one hundred and fifty pages. Seeing me with the files my wife got irked -"What is it? The files cling to you or you cling to them?"

"Both ways" I told her" You should go to bed. I shall wake you up if I need you.'

"There's no need. You stick to your files. I won't disturb you and you won't disturb me!" She was quite annoyed.

Then she went to bed and I untied the red tape. At first I just glanced through the papers. Then I picked one and began reading it-

Most respected *Huzoor*

A hundred salaams at your feet. I beg to inform you that your most obedient this Chaita Munda, was serving as peon of your majesty. After thirty five years he was deprived of serving you. Since he was a government servant and had worked with full sincerity he thinks he deserves a pension. He has been applying to your majesty for the last three years.

Unfortunately no provision of pension has been made as yet. So it is his humble submission that *huzoor* would take appropriate steps. With another salaam to huzoor.

Your faithful servant

Chaita Munda

I went to another page -

Most respected huzoor

A hundred salaams. With due respect and humble submission I am replying to your letter. Your majesty wants to know my date of birth. Huzoor, I am an unlettered tribal, I don't know my date of birth. I had read in the village school a couple of years and at that time my date of birth was mentioned in the school register. That date was taken into my service book which is in your office, huzoor.

Huzoor also wants to know why I overstayed in the service for one year without informing the government that I had already attained the pensionable age. But huzoor, it is not my fault I don't remember my date of birth. Had this unlettered tribal known when he was to retire he would certainly have obliged. But your obedient servant knew nothing of that. yet if he has served one year more let that salary be deducted from the pension due to him. Five years have already elapsed and no decision has yet been taken. So I beg the *huzoor* most humbly to pay heed to my problem soon.

With another salam

Your faithful servant

Chaita Munda

A page in the second file- another letter -

Most respected *huzoor*

With due respect I beg to state that your obedient servant has lost his wife only a month back. He has only a son and a daughter. They are not work hands. XXX It has been six year now and I am yet to get the pension. Huzoor, your judgment I await XXXX

Your faithful servant

Chaita Munda

Another page in the second file -

Most respected *huzoor*

I beg to inform with grave sorrow that my twenty-two year old son left me in a sea of helplessness by dying of typhoid as I could not give him proper medicine. I had only a son and a daughter after my wife had left me. My son was the sole wage-earner. Now he is gone. My daughter is too young to work. Let me tell you, hozoor, that I have already lost four children earlier. I am sure you can feel the depth of my sorrow XXX This unlettered tribal old man is left with no land, no work to manage the household. The pension is all that I am hoping for XXXX For the last ten years I have been praying you for that, to no avail XXX Your obedient servant has no money to make frequent trips to Bhubaneswar. If the kindhearted huzoor could spare sometime to consider his case he would be ever grateful XXXX

Your faithful servant Chaita Munda

I closed the files. I had run out of patience. The wall clock struck two. Wife was fast asleep. Without disturbing her I settled to sleep.

Four days later Chaita Munda stepped into my room and bowed before me. Then he let his staff prop up his trembling body. I was watching him closely; poor fellow! Nobody to pay heed to him, nobody to take care. A grievous anguish was writ large on him.

I asked him to sit on the stool and said- " Look, Chaita! I have read your files and have written to the government. You can keep a copy of this letter to the government" I held out the letter for him to take "What shall I do with it, huzoor? Let that letter be with you. When the pension comes give that to me. What shall I do with this paper ? In the last eleven years I have got

many papers like this; but I am yet to get the pension! I have waited for eleven years, I can carry on till my death! Can't I huzoor'? he said and kept quiet.

There were tears in his eyes and a deep anguish in his words.

I tried to console him- " Look, Chaita, please have patience! When I go on tour to Bhubaneswar I shall definitely attend to your work. I give you my word that I shall surely do my best for you. Have patience for a few more days."

" Huzoor, why only a few days I can wait till my death. Man lives on hope, *huzoor* and the thought of my pension would torment me till death!"

He did not say anything else and left after making his bow to me. I was looking at him. The fumes of his anguish had stayed back in my room even after he had left. The fumes were choking me! However I never smoke and create fumes.

Tr. by Bibhuti Mishra.

A NAMELESS EVENT

Prafulla Kumar Tripathy

The scantily-captioned ad on the billboard smells of fresh turpentine. It bears the picture of a woman in the act of receiving. Her brows are a manually shaped growth of stiff stubby hair. The glitter in her eyes is because of two tricky strokes of whitepaint by the artist. She is trying to express an admixture of curiosity, happiness and thankfulness.

A few flakes of her thigh have come out. An area of the shining metal is exposed. It reflects the tired yellow sun going down the water tower. Birds peck at her ochre breasts.

Motorists ignore the change of light. Scooterists forget to pull the clutch. Pedestrians take root on the road. The nude on the billboard continuously smiles and proclaims the goodness of a bottled drink.

The persuasively-painted and worded ad gets into me everytime I pass by the square. I like it and admire in silence. I lick my lips. I do not send my palm into my pocket. I know it is empty.

When I feel thirsty for a glass of cold water, I walk to the railway platform. There I join my palms to catch water.

I am not one man; I am a collage of different men and a kaleidoscope of various personalities. You may call me a spring in a continuous state of flow. I make my routined rounds through the dark roads only to return to a place I can not call my own. There a giant spool lets out lengths of ribbon when I am alone. Those are my miles recording the impress of my untired feet.

On my feet, I cannot tell from where and why I have come. I can not say where will I go. I have no address, no destination; I am just here and now.

I am a present for you. My mother made a gift of me to this place which was not so peopled when I was born. A page in the first register of birth, now placed at the bottom of a column of such yearly registers filled in

remained changeless for all these years. A tree has grown on my father's death spot. Like all healthy trees it gives out a lot of leaves and fruits. The dry leaves are collected and packed into sacks by old women. The fruits are picked by passers-by and picnickers.

It was all very good and meaningful when my mother was with me.

'Learn to live alone', she asked and I obeyed. Now she lives her life and wishes to see me often, I live my life and wish to see her often.

I am not contemplative and evolved. I am primitive, dynamic and fundamental. The room which I inhabit is one of a honeycomb. It is my cell. The world outside is a vast jungle. There is enough proof sounded from the nearby square and adjoining streets. Honking, blaring, screeching cars and all the other varieties of unwelcome noise.

I keep on moving in silence. My belonging is mobile. Whenever I want to hear real human voices, I spend my nights by the side of the railway platform. In my room I do not get even a yard of loneliness. I am a peopled man. My connections extend up to the invisible walls surrounding the city. Many people know me by face. I also recognize them in crowds. I am every moment mouthed over to other men.

Things do not arrive on time. They ask me, 'Why ?' I put on a grin. Events do not happen on time. people do not come on time. There is no need of complaint or lamentation. It is usual.

One has to wait to get everything one needs and multiply the spent hours with the number of people in his fold. That will reasonably justify his spending.

I was off when they all were photographed. I was also off when favours were distributed. I did not bag any prize or trophy. In fact I do not have a bag. I am a bag myself.

Eighty beats every minute. That is how I live. Wearing beads of sweat and smile, commuting everyday between the centre and its circumference. The surveying eyes of the state have observed one hundred and twenty-eight people committing suicide everyday. Incurable diseases, quarrel in the family, poverty, failure in examinations, interviews and love affairs are reported as the driving reasons. There are guaranteed, tested and proven tips leading to self-death. However I do not wish to learn the latest technique of quick and easy death. In fact, I do not have a reason and I cannot take my life just to establish my free will.

'Every minute I die a little. The long list of openly available, cheap and purchasable food contains enough poison to kill a generation. I eat combinations of these items and wait patiently. It will come, I am sure. I take poison or not, I take food or not. It will come surely, but very slowly.

The inmates of our super flat assemble in little groups and engage. Belly to belly they dance - islands of mankind. Half sighted they try to thread the needle: Overhead their stamping feet hammer on my head. A couple got a son after eleven years of matrimony. That makes them dance and yell.

I am alone, windowless in my room, stretched with my limp limbs. The most vital was cremated in the darkness of a suburban whorehouse. My face does not speak my years and is not known to any postman.

I am loaded like a hungry gun. Ineffective trigger and that makes me unwind and wind the spool of ribbon the same length the day before today and possibly the day after today.

What is this hole that keeps me secured, I do not know. What is this pull from the hospital yard that I crave for ?

Unattainable by knowledge, never understood. I do not tag a name to it. I let that remain un-named and un-nameable. The moment that will follow this moment will bring a flood of darkness and that will be all my own, all my wealth of leftover wishes.

Dying thus continuously nonstop is routine. It continually dehours my life. Everywhere I read the name in bold type face and see the face in flawless halftone appearing daily in our news-sheets. The letterblind are compensated adequately and made to listen to that, the name and the face belong to their saviour. No foundation stone has ever been laid for the magic bridge that will connect the capital with the muffasil.

Salaried workers still begging backdoor, money still in flight, idle power brokers still calculating the untaken steps, walls still worded with mis-spelt slogans make me conscious of our big failures.

I am failure manned inside a frail body. Nobody understands. When purchasable things get priority over individuals, human love becomes mercenary. I am suspended like an indecisive speck of dust.

"I was not happy, because I was going without a pair of shoes and one day I found a man without feet." I was ashamed when I learnt this. I

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am ashamed, now, because I am unable to quench any thirst with my sweat and tear. I am asked to empty my pen of its ink.

A blank sheet of paper looms large in front, multiplies and spreads into every pore within. I am afraid.

I was afraid when it was said it was time to pray at the forgotten deities and ask them to linger in the comfort of enveloping darkness.

Charred dreams are garlanded with stolen flowers and taken out in procession through the winding street of our town. The dream-vendors have entered the castle, with proper license and lease-sheets neatly folded in their pockets. The dazzle of their wares distract men in the streets.

I am ready like a long-distance runner with plenty of stamina and breath in reserve to start. I am ready and raring to go. I am ready like a homemade bomb lighted at a distant end to suddenly burst and scatter myself into myriad pieces. My readiness keeps me glued to my little world of well-, ill-, half-, semi-known faces and their adhesive affection. The real in me wishes to take a leap into the bigger world outside. But a paralytic inaction is all I am able to achieve.

It is not my inability or lack of anything that keeps me happy with my little successes and minor achievements. When I sink deep into myself I often find it is a bottomless depth.

Scanning through the pages of the railway timetable is my latest hobby-why, it can be called a passion the manner I spend my lonely hours on them. The names of places. They become my favourite mouth-drill in pronunciation. I make all sorts of labio-dental, nasal and palatal sounds. Each length of sound calls out a name. Name of a place. In addition, there is also a pocket-size atlas of the known world. With these two things at hand I often think. into myself that I have acquired the basic essentials of a true tourist - a jobless wayfarer. Yes I am ready to start, to actually walk out of my room and take the first train that leaves this dirty little town.

Is there a place I can really reach and stay without daily worry and failures? Will the tamed nature accept me ? I am fed up with people - my mother, the patients and the shop-keepers. Every moment they suck out all the life I have. They make killing demands on me. I make a count of every beat of my heart. It is tired. I want to save myself. My mind is trampled by every one around me. There is no meaning in my existence. I do not know how to bring a smooth end to this.

Can I become a resourceless wanderer without any address ? Can I really leave like this ? Must I smile to unknown faces ? Must I beg? Where is the complete garden I can enter and pluck my fruits? Will the trees and clouds argue with me? Will the stream refuse its water?

My mind is a vast desert. There are irregular dunes and furrows. The questions fall as little drops of rain, which can never penetrate the dry layers of sand to get at the answer. I move with heaps of questions over my head.

No one takes my problem seriously. Instead everybody asks me to marry. That will change your life. They assure.

I tried to find out the chief reason, why some of my known faces married. Ram married, because his father had to pay back old debts. Shyam married because he needed a house on rent. Hari married because he needed a pillion rider on his two-wheeler and to make the best use of precious fuel. Kishore got a wife to get tickets at cinema halls with more ease. Many people married because they wanted to protect themselves from unwelcome girls. Madhu was tired of washing his hankies and socks every day. He decided to marry. Other friends wanted to verify the stories about marriage and therefore agreed to marry. Banu wanted to know what it was like. Mitu wanted to tell his own sorrows.

Every one had a reason, it seems now.

I go by the description: short, fair and slim. In reality I am 5ft 7inches tall with whitish complexion and I weigh 63 kilograms. Last time I knew it at the railway station. A friend was leaving us in search of his luck. I had borrowed a coin from him and dropped it down the slit of the weighing machine which produced some strange sounds and issued an ill-printed ticket. The ticket had on it these words printed - "You are avid for the experiences of life, for a constant seeking after new sensations."

I could not make any sense of the sentence and returned in silence.

The colour of my past is yellow. Yellow are the leaves. Leaves grow as usual. Usual is their fall. Fall is death. Death is easy. Easy like this?

Perhaps, no. The evening wind sweeps away the last and rare streak of yellow from the sky. The storm, when it comes, un-roots the heavy trees. Now only a wind is blowing. When will the storm come?

Back in my room I sit by the wall. There is a good opening to my neighbour's room. It serves me well. I crawl nearest to the floor and have

a peep into the interior. I usually see pairs of shoes on the mat and shiny legs of the bed. When I see these, there is a yawning gap in my mouth. My lips part, open wide and remain open. It is uneasy to believe what I see. I go near the hole and focus my attention into the other side.

There is mouth on mouth. Hands on breasts. Legs entwined. The man drills into an orifice. The woman pulls him into herself. Her face changes from dull to elated. They maintain their smiles and do quick loving. They separate. I remove myself several meters away from the scene. The woman opens the door and appears on the corridor. She walks out. She knows her way.

I join the other 'boys' later in the backyard and tell them what I saw. No one is surprised. No one needs any elaboration.

Changes are coming everywhere, they say. Fields becoming roads, mountain tops oozing out slurry metal ore. Wooden poles entering into holes. Changes are coming everywhere, do not you see? They ask. They yell from all corners, they celebrate every moment. They gaze at every centimeter. They say, boys and girls are growing, metals are given new shapes and shine. Winds are visiting places. Men and events are becoming names.

They drop and pick names, they break and make reputations.

They bring changes, they say, ways of this world merit bewilderment. We can have the same symbol for both, truth and falsehood. I always have to share a seat in buses and trains with my hand luggage. There is a dearth of space everywhere. Must I protect my papers?

My mother is my memory. Whenever I remember her, I return to her restless world.

She says, "I want to put a levy on courage" and asks, "Can you find out how it will work?" I hesitate. My dumbness rattles her.

I tell her, "Mother, do you know, I have already reached thirty. What a good thing to be thirty years old and still searching. Once I told a man the way to hell and he thanked me. Only the animals in the zoo and machines in the workshops have retained their systems." Mother smiles. moves her hand on my shoulder and tells, "You are a perpetual babbler. Oh, when will you learn to speak?" I return a smile and speak, "Courage has already become a rare commodity. If you put a levy everyone will default."
My mother understands and agrees. We declare courage unattainable and

return to our living spots. My room is just enough space to hold an average-man along with all his accessories. There are many such rooms in the building. We call these traps rooms because these have doors, which can be closed and locked. We are living in a vast locker.

Prisons are better places, it is said. Now, if I commit the offence of breaking into the prison, what punishment other than putting me back in it may be awarded on me? The people in this town do not talk. It is said the prisoners are very talkative. I want to talk to people.

When I am eager most I go back to my mother. "Speak some words sweet and simple and dazzle a silence, sweat out and swear in your measured wagging of the tongue. A camp will scatter. That is the strength of speech," she reminds me.

Everything is not lost. Predictions are just marks of a presence: inactive and vague.

"Everything is not lost", my mother agrees. There are many coloured stones rooted as worshipable deities. Choose one and fix yourself there and chant out your sweet lengthy despair."

I can not sing out my despair in her presence. I make a trip to the orchard by the river.

The river shrinks in summer.

A blazing heat wave sweeps and burns the dry fallen leaves.

I look for a shadowed spot.

The wind runs errands for the unflavoured season.

I am in my minimal Indian workwear.

I wish to acquire the grace of being naked, here and now.

Somewhere up the hill a cuckoo makes a three-note call. Then there is a pause and the silver spring dancing down the hills utters an old line of verse. When the wind returns, it brings back the wet shrill of the cuckoo's call. Sound seeps into the branches and leaves. The ground is shadowed, cold and silent. I wish to cooperate and remain silent. Every time I am speechless, hundred seeds of thought sprout, grow and murmur.

How pleasant it is to listen to the tales of the trees. They do not tell of their despair. Their tales are the eternal narrations of growth and decay appearances and escapes.

I close down my eyes and sit on a smooth rounded piece of rock under the shadow of a thickly-leaved tree.

Once it happened in an instant. It happened so very quickly, came and went without any introduction and excuse. Like the pointed end of a sharp blazing sword. The tip was touching my eyelids and was probably trying to push into my eyes. I lifted my hands to ward off the lethal point. My eyes must have become glassy and my face must have looked horrible. I attempted a shriek, that got stuck somewhere in my throat. My limbs trembled, froth at my face, I jerked, sat and covered my face. The palms felt icy and I knew it was all over.

After the departure of that cruel and magnificent presence I groaned and moaned. My head was heavy. I wished a long sleep, and got it.

It was many years ago and it was also yesterday. No one knows.

Tr. by the author

THE GHOST

Uttam Kumar Pradhan

It is always more exciting to listen to stories of ghosts than to write on them. I have a terrible weakness for such stories. I believe anyone in any corner of this earth is quite capable of telling a ghost story. The drivers on the highway especially dish out excellent ghost stories from their real life experience. I happened to compile a book on the ghosts of the highways of Orissa too. Needless to say, while writing that book I had to collect eyewitness reports from many highway drivers. But this story of mine records my most awesome encounter with a ghost.

It was a moonlit night in December. I was scheduled to leave Phulbani by ten in the night and reach Sunabeda by eight the next morning. It being a tricky ghat road I had to seek the services of a competent driver. It had to be a cautious ride, after all. The driver fell silent as the ghat road began. However, personally, I don't relish the idea of a driver driving along in perfect silence. Who knows, he could afford to dream on the steering. Suddenly I leaned against him with all my weight and shrieked: Ghost!

Mathan Singh, the driver pressed the brake and the vehicle was narrowly saved. He came back to senses and queried: "Where is it, Sahib?" I said, "Mathan Singh! Please do chat along while driving. Or, else, it appears as if you are snoring and the vehicle is moving on its own!"

I found Mathan Singh hesitating. So I continued, "All that I want to listen to is stories about ghosts. Yes, ghost stories from your real-life experience. You must have encountered them in dark nights. Why don't you come up with one such story?"

Mathan Singh began: "Sir, ghosts, ghosts, so many ghosts. A human being turns a ghost after death, but do you know the fate of a ghost after it dies?"

I stared at him rather curiously. "Listen, sir, a ghost turns into a lizard, or a frog or even a mouse after its death. Last year S. P. Sahib fired at the old banyan tree on the outskirts of the town, and believe me sir, a white -

complexioned woman who had been swinging in the sky suddenly fell on the ground with a thud. In torch light we noticed her lying dead."

"The woman died? Did you see in your own eyes?"

"Yes sir, she was lying dead. I had seen it in my own eyes. But the ghost played a trick at the moment of her death. She turned into an owl."

"How funny", I said, rather with an expression of disappointment.

"I know sir, you would dispute the idea of a ghost. But ghosts do exist. I may not have seen it but I have heard its cry.

Only a month back, I had the privilege of accompanying the big bosses of the town on a picnic to a spot only four miles away from this place, on the foot hills of those big hillocks.

It all happened on the full moon day sir. All the vehicles of the officers' colony turned up at eight in the morning. I was in charge of the vehicle of the project engineer, Biswakesh Babu. He had a son, just like a doll, as fair as cotton with round eyes. How sweetly he was chatting along. All the while he would call up his mummy and daddy for everything.

It was a grand feast, really. Mutton and mutton all the way. Around three p.m. after the dinner the ladies moved down stream to visit a temple of Lord Shiva. A narrow kuchha road sloping down after branching off from the one the ladies were travelling by. The children wanted to do it alone. Twelve kids, from ten to two years of age, busied themselves in gathering wild flowers.

Incidentally, I must tell you, Biswakesh Babu's son had a special fascination for flowers. Bit of a daredevil. As he moved ahead of all the boys trying to reach a bunch of flowers from a wild shrub, a tiger appeared from nowhere. All the kids beat a hasty retreat noticing the tiger. The temple was only a couple of feet away. The tiger lifted Papun in their presence and disappeared into the jungle. Who the hell would talk of visiting the temple any more? It all ended up in unbearable wailing and confusion.

While escorting Biswakesh Babu and his wife back my steering wheel was soaked in tears. I am a human being, sir. Even a piece of stone would have melted at the heart-rending wailing of the lady..............."

Exactly at this moment the sound of a child's sobbing could be heard from a distance. The echoes of a child's cry reverberated in the desolate valley surrounded by mountains.

Mathan Singh shuddered and said, "Do you hear the cry of that child,

sir? It is already a month since he died. But his ghost has been searching for his mother in these hilly tracts. Whenever I had an occasion to pass by I have heard the cry of the child emerging from the temple downstream. Do you hear it sir? Ghosts do exist."

I was lost measuring the depths of the child's lamentation; Mathan Singh became an irrelevance for me. The full moon seemed to be swimming among the small flakes of clouds. The child's cry gradually drew nearer.

At a particular turn of the road Mathan Singh used the brake all of a sudden and the jeep screeched to a halt. He was trembling and sweating profusely and had turned speechless. He gestured at me to look beyond. A two-year-old child crying aloud was moving along the road all alone in our direction. It was a bright complexioned naked healthy child looking so handsome in the moonlight. He was trying to wipe out his tears with his left hand and looking at the powerful flashlight of our vehicle, he seemed to cry even louder as if it had no end.

"Sir, this is Papun's ghost! A ghost must not be taken casually. Please sit up carefully, sir. I shall run over him and smash him to pieces. Or, else, it would pounce on me".

As I was trying to utter a cry Mathan pressed the accelerator with all the strength at his command. And the vehicle ran over the child who was advancing towards us with both his hands raised. A heart-rending cry 'mummy' rent through the valley and reverberated against the mountainous walls.

I was struck dumb. As I was trying to mop up my tears Mathan laughed and said, "Just wait sir, you will see a lizard lying dead on the road instead".

But soon we saw an ascetic come running towards us. He spotted our vehicle and as he came nearer we saw him panting for breath. He enquired, "*Baba, ek bachhako dekha kya*? (Did you see a child, dear?)

The ascetic looked godly. He had long white flowing beard, matted locks on his head and had put on ochre coloured *koupin*. Before I spoke anything Mathan Singh replied "*Kya Baba, aap bhi yehi bhut ki chakkar me ho - ham bhutko khatam kar dale hein, aabhi koi khatra nahin, jaiye, jaiye*. (Dear saint, are you also after the ghost? I have already smashed it. There is no danger anymore. Please move along."

No sooner did the ascetic hear this, than he pressed both his ears in disbelief and wailed like a child. I had never seen a saint crying all my life. Tears dripping down his long flowing beard glistened like the waters of a mountain spring. I had jumped out of the vehicle in the meantime and held the ascetic in my embrace and enquired," Tell us frankly dear, how are you concerned with the child?"

The ascetic had bowed his head. He looked at me in sheer anguish and said, "No concern, no bond, an ascetic just cannot have a bond-come along- now only we shall establish a bond-" and he advanced in the direction in which the vehicle had met the child. Mathan Singh followed me.

We came upon the dead body of the child. He had fallen still among waves of blood shining in the clear moonlight. Mathan Singh cried aloud-" Sir, he is Papun, the dear child of Biswakesh Babu-even if a ghost died - it died the death of a human being."

But the ascetic picked up the child's body and held him close to his breast. He brushed his beard against the child. His voice got choked as he said-"Dear, could you collect some flowers?" We moved along the narrow dusty road with the saint to the temple. The fountain was flowing close by. There were a lot of yellow oleander and jasmine plants. As we were collecting flowers, the ascetic had dug a hole with the help of a stick in the front yard of the temple.

He laid the body of the child in the hole and asked us to offer flowers. He collected a sapling from a nearby bush and planted it there. Tears rolled down his eyes as he narrated the story of Papun.

The ascetic was a man of Dwaraka. He had performed worship and meditation at all the places of pilgrimage. On his way to Dandakaranya, Chitrakut, he had come there only a year ago. He revived the temple. No one ever visited that place earlier. Only two or three tribals from the nearby valley used to carry one-fourth litre of milk and a little millet everyday.

It was only a month ago that the ascetic discovered the child one evening after returning from the valley. He was sobbing then. The ascetic gave him a little milk and then searched the whole area. He realised that the townsfolk had been there for a picnic. Thereafter he had stopped many passing vehicles and enquired if any one of them had left behind a child. But none paid any heed to his words especially because of the talk of a ghost doing the rounds.

The child used to cry and cry day in and day out. Whenever he felt hungry the ascetic would give him a glass of milk and then the child would fall asleep. However, at times, the child was in the habit of running about the road crying all alone while the ascetic would be resting-

At this Mathan Singh broke down in tears like a child and fell flat at the feet of the ascetic, "Bury me in that soil, at once, O my lord, what a sinner am I.........."

But the ascetic remained unmoved. Neither our prayer nor tears had any visible effect on him. He was looking more composed and serene. He took out his walking stick and 'kamandalu' from a corner of the temple verandah and said- "Let us go then - it is all an illusion of attachment- an illusion."

I requested the ascetic to board our vehicle. But he stared at me and said, "Dear, the road you are going to move along is full of twists and turns. it goes curving all the way. But mine is a straight one." The ascetic disappeared into the jungle in no time. Only the sound of his stick beating against the stony surface of the jungle could be heard for some time.

Mathan Singh kept gazing at the temple, the deep valley with its dense forest cover and the full moon in the sky.

A year after the incident I tried to locate Mathan Singh in Phulbani once. But I heard he had turned an ascetic. No one could tell me his whereabouts.

I had an occasion to see Biswakesh Babu in the hospital, a chance encounter. His four year old son had been showing strange symptoms. He used to faint at the sight of a flower. I could not help asking him straight away, "Did you see in your own eyes the tiger killing your first son?"

With an expression of pain and pity in his eyes he looked up and said, "Others had seen, Papun had been killed by a tiger- but why talk of all that now..."

I cut him short, "Your son had never been killed by a tiger, at no point, and he is of course, no more- I am extremely sorry, Biswakesh. This locket of your son was lying with me for a long time. I received it from an ascetic some time ago.

The wife of Biswakesh Babu noticed the locket that once used to adorn Papun's neck and passed out with a loud shattering cry.

Tr. by Rohini Kanta Mukherje

THE PATHWAY

Tarun Kanti Mishra

Right in front of the house: a heap of garbage, a whiff of stench from the drain and some splinters of darkness on the verandah.

All these the youngman passed, one after another, before he touched the front door. Such meticulously careful hand lest it should butt in one's sleep.

He did not have to knock on the door twice; it opened slowly, like a magic door.

It was dark inside.

From the other end came an indistinct female voice enquiring, 'Who is there?' and saying a little later, "O you!'

Inside the room, there was no light, no light on the verandah either; in short, the lane was buried in darkness.

Load-shedding. From evening six to eight-thirty.

'Come in.'

The young man handed over a small paper bag to the girl. Then bending a little, he started unlacing his shoes.

'Grandpa is unwell, again,' said the girl, fixing her eyes on the listless darkness.

'What's the temperature now?'

'I don't know, but his body feels warm.'

The question was pointless. There was no thermometer in the house. For quite some time, perhaps.

'Has he taken any medicine?'

'No, but if the fever persists, I think, I'll have to go to Dr. Das tomorrow.'

The girl lighted a candle, which shone on a pair of tender hands, tired eyes and the blouse with a button unfastened.

'When did you return from office?' the young man asked.

'About an hour back. Come, tea will be ready in a minute.'

'A lantern burnt feebly in the courtyard. The air seemed trapped under a slice of the sky, dark and moonless.

The girl went towards the kitchen, candle in hand. Before settling on the plank bed, the young man peered into the bedroom. From inside came the sound of long sleepy gasps and the irregular gulps of air from a phlegm-filled chest.

Somewhere far off, there was a noise. May be, someone was squabbling with a hawker at the end of the street. May be, it was a minor accident. Or usual antics of the street urchins.

From a distance, it's all the same: joys or tears, anger or sorrow. The young man gazed at the sky. He could see nothing in that empty expanse. A hand reached out of the darkness, a voice said softly, 'Your tea.'

The girl held in her hand a cup for herself. After a sip, she asked tenderly, 'Why are you so quiet? Aren't you feeling well?'

'No, I'm okay,' the young man answered vaguely.

'*Ees*, look, so many stars in the sky !' exclaimed the girl, her eyes glittering like a couple of stars.

'Is it *amavasya* tonight ?'

The young man did not reply. Either he did not know the answer or the question seemed irrelevant.

Suddenly, a bout of coughing interrupted the sleepy breathing in the bedroom. It was followed by a feeble voice calling, 'Manju, where are you?'

Putting the teacup on the plank bed the girl walked towards the bedroom.

A sip of water, a bedpan or help for turning on the side was all that the paralytic man needed now.

The young man followed her after he finished his tea.

The man lying on the cot smelt the air and asked, 'Who, Jajati !'

'Yes, it's me,' answered the young man.

'Where were you all these days? Have you forgotten us?'

The young man was going to say something in reply but remained quiet. He came almost every evening; it was only yesterday that he could not drop in. For good reasons.

The old man asked, 'Have you brought that?'

'Yes,' said he, 'I have given it to Manju.'

'Then give it to me', the old man raised his hand.

The girl pleaded: 'No, not now, Grandpa. You can have it a little later. It's so dark now:'

'Dark! My foot!' fumed the old man, "Can't one munch a handful of *mudhi* in the dark!'

The girl had reasons to object. This stuff would upset the stomach of the ailing man.

The old man always craved for just a mouthful of mudhi mixed with spices. He would get into a foul mood if he could not have this at least thrice a week. And, mind you, homemade stuff would not do: it had to have all the toothsome spices.

'What would you like to have tonight, Grandpa ?', asked the girl, 'rice or roti ?'

'I 'll have ashes!' growled the old man, grinding his teeth. A blob of anger melted as it slid down his phlegm-filled chest.

Of course, he did not always throw tantrums like this. At times he would also be cheerful. He would then talk endlessly about by-gone days. An encounter with a man-eater in Koraput valley, a rain-washed night in Chilka lake. Or he would talk about his discovery of a recipe for baking fish with *saru* leaves.

'Just wait, let me get a little better. I will one day cook you a wonderful dish of fish with *saru* leaves. It will be so delicious I bet you fellows would lick your fingers all day.'

Grandapa was confident that soon he would regain his former strength. Almost inevitably, he would begin a journey along a reverse pathway through the various stages of old age, youth, childhood and finally to infancy. 'But, first of all, let this winter pass.'

The girl went out of the room, carrying an empty glass and a urine-filled can. The darkness, sticky and invisible like cobwebs, hung over the room now.

The old man's voice sounded more animated than before.

'A little while ago, I was dreaming a very strange dream:'

The young man bent forward to listen what he wanted to say.

' I dreamed I was on back of a white horse. A robust horse in fine fettle, a Pegasus, as it were. On either side stretched a jungle. Snowflakes

fell silently through the air. I did not know where I was heading. But I galloped along for miles and miles ... just pull the blanket over my leg, left leg...

'Yes, then, I merged into a big procession. Not knowing what kind of procession it was. At length, I found out it was my marriage procession. And it continued for long till my horse was completely worn out, the white of his body turned peacock blue and the flakes of snow flew about like plumes of roosters in the wind. Then...'

Grandpa paused. Perhaps he took a deep sigh. May be, with his left hand, he wiped the saliva that trickled out of his mouth.

.... ' I can't recollect what happened next. All that I can remember is I spent my honeymoon night right away... *'Dhut* !' exclaimed Grandpa, 'What a fool I was then! A real chump !'

A splutter was heard. The old man was chuckling to himself.

The sound faded. Perhaps he was raking up old memories. Or he had dozed off.

The young man came out of the room. Sitting on the verandah, the girl was making a dough of flour. A transistor lay on the plank bed.

'This belongs to Mohanty babu, our neighbour,' said the girl, 'Would you check what's wrong with this, he says it does not tune in short wave!'

There was earnestness in her voice, as if she wanted to entrust him with the most important task in the world.

The young man picked up the transistor. He twiddled with it for sometime and then gave up.

'It doesn't work at all, not even on the medium band; does it have batteries?'

Today a customer had come to his shop with a radio like this. 'Have a look at this damned thing, will you! Only a week ago I had put a couple of brand new heavy-duty batteries, and barely heard the seven o'clock news twice a day. And now this black box is as dead as a coffin!'

After half an hour's close scrutiny, the problem was detected.

'Did you say batteries are down! Then it must be that Kalia, the wretch! He must have gulped down the tablets and slept with Vividh Bharati centre on. Thousand of times have I asked that swine, that skunk not to do this!'

The man walked away in a huff without offering a pie. But not without

a parting remark, 'Does it take a whole afternoon for a mechanic to discover such a little fault?'

Today came some seven customers in all. Three of them went away telling that they would get things done cheaper elsewhere. Two others returned, saying, 'Let's see tomorrow.'

Today's total earning was a meagre twenty-seven rupees and a half. After a deduction of three for the puffed rice, he was left with twenty-four and a half, eleven rupees less than yesterday's proceeds.

Shyama Prasad was not far from the truth when he pronounced: it's no good running a radio repairing shop these days. Who listens to transistors now? It's better to run a pan-shop, or perhaps sell *gupchups*.

'Do you know? Today that rascal vexed me again - on my way to office', the girl said while putting vegetable peels into a brass bowl.

'Of course, he couldn't do that for long', she added. 'He bolted away the moment he saw Mohanty babu's younger son, Tukuna, coming from the opposite end.'

A few days ago, that boy had sent a dirty letter to her. Full of obscenities. Of course she did not read a line of it. She handed over the letter to Jajati when she saw a stranger's hand. He ran his eyes over the letter, tore it up and flung the pieces to the gutter.

He did not tell her what the letter contained. Nor did she tell him what obscenities the boy mouthed, finding her alone.

The girl returned to the kitchen. The verandah seemed empty, the courtyard lonely.

There was no moon in the sky. Only a panoply of stars.

At a distance, someone sang softly. Perhaps the girl hummed a tune in the kitchen and fell silent. Perhaps some nameless bird flew into the sky calling out its lost companion. It could also be the whispers of the night.

Radio fascinated the young man since childhood. Voices from distance stirred him deeply. Strains of an unknown song, an inaudible voice from a faraway place awakened strange longings in him, haunted him.

What do those distant voices want to say ? What are their sorrows? What makes them happy? The young man fixed his gaze at a solitary star in the sombre sky. Then he turned to look at the transistor-lying hurt and humiliated on the plank bed - in silence.

He picked up the transistor and held it in his lap for a while. He felt as though it was a strange casket, a tangle of unvoiced emotions. In the

dark, he opened the transistor and explored the web of its mysterious secrets.

As though by the touch of a magic wand, the dead instrument's soul was stirred. A solitary human voice from a faraway land drifted in, and soon trailed off into empty silence.

The young man tried again. Snatches of music floated in. He checked the instrument with deft fingers and found it in perfect order, all its bands accessible, all its switches in harmony.

He turned off the transistor.

But strangely, the musical notes went on. As if this is eternity, this is destiny.

The girl was humming a tune in the kitchen, stumbling sometimes at the loose ends of the scale. Yet, her voice had the freedom of a bird, soaring into the sky. It held the promises of infinity.

What conviction, what realization animated her song? She could not possibly remember the face of her mother or father; she did not know whether the paralytic man lying in the next room would be alive tomorrow There was no knowing if she would continue in her temporary job next month.

On whom does she rely? What gives her so much confidence? He has made her no promises. He has no commitment to honour.

The young man got up from the plank bed. Slowly, he moved towards the kitchen and stood at the door. The girl was busy boiling milk in an earthen pot. The burning coal of the hearth cast a strange glow on the contours of her firm and tender body.

He called, 'Manju !'

The girl turned to look.

'Manju, I want to tell you something.'

'Tell me."

The young man said nothing.

The girl moved closer.

'What do you want to say?'

'Manju !'

The young man drew a couple of long and deep breaths as though trying to ease up after running miles.

The girl now came out of the kitchen to the verandah, and asked,

"Aren't you feeling well?'

'Yes I'm, ' mumbled the young man.

Then, as if trying to recall a long-forgotten script, he said, 'I'll not come here tomorrow.'

'Won't come?'

'No.'

'Then-'

A puff of wind began to blow through the courtyard. The leaves of a *Peepul* tree stirred on the other side of the house. Beyond all this were heard fits of coughing in the bedroom. A frail voice called, 'Manju .... Manju...'

'I'll not come tomorrow', said the young man again, ' I cannot say when I'll come next.'

The young man sounded like an inept actor repeating his words on the stage.

'Manju, Manju ...'

The leaves of the *Peepul* tree dropped into the dark and gaping void. The wind was heavy with uneasy breath.

A spectral hand snuffed out the unsteady flame in the lantern and disappeared into an uncertain void. Now darkness reigned. After it was all dark, the girl could see everything clearly. Now she could see how lonely she was and realise how complete she was in her aloneness.

Tr. by Bhagaban Jayasingh

THE BRIDGE

Jashodhara Mishra

The girl was standing on the stairs in the shadow which only partially covered her body. Sumati's eyes fell on her."What do you want ? she said, standing behind the half open window. Her voice was rather brusque for she had been trying to snatch some afternoon sleep and had just slid into her siesta when she heard an insistent tapping on the door which brought her out of her languor.

Sumati saw a girl stepping down from the stairs and walking over to the window, her face wreathed in a smile in spite of the enervating heat."Didi, I have brought a few things for you to see,"she said.

Accepting her greeting with an imperceptible nod of her head, Sumati watched the girl undecidedly, trying to make up her mind whether to go and open the door for her or just turn her away.

Walking down the wirescreened verandah, Sumati unlatched the door and gingerly holding it half ajar asked the girl what she wanted. The girl removed her red plastic airbag from her shoulder, a rigid smile fixed on her face. But before Sumati could give vent to her irritation the girl said, "Didi, I have brought some nice articles for you from Jagdamba chemicals. Some cosmetics. I'll show them to you in case you feel interested."

Sumati had already said goodbye to her siesta and the red bag had aroused her curiosity. Ignoring the girl's made-to-order ingratiating smile she pulled up an iron chair and sat down on it. The girl breezily climbed up the stairs, her shadow chasing her.

"Let me see what you have to offer," Sumati said. "No cheap cosmetics for me, mind you. I hate them."

"You need not tell me that, didi, I can see that for myself. I know you use cosmetics very sparingly."

A swarthy, sparsely built, slim girl. She could be 22, 23, in fact any age. A longish, sensitive face from which she kept wiping sweat leaving

motley powder stains on it. Her hair which she must have groomed in the morning had now gone awry in the heat. A thick bun hung loosely at the back of her neck. She was wearing a faded red sari and a blouse to match.

She had deposited her red bag at the top of the stairs, near the edge of the verandah. After dusting it with her handkerchief she unzipped its top and out came, one by one, bottles of snow, boxes of powder, plastic containers of *sindur, kajal* and other sundry items which she arrayed neatly on the verandah floor. Then she sat down on the top step of the stairs. Her entire body seemed to have surrendered itself to the overlapping shadows. She proceeded to describe the excellence of each item in a profusion of words, recommending them with gusto, the word 'didi' running as a refrain at the beginning or the end of each sentence. "Didi" have a good look at it. First class *alta,* didi"."Use this *sindur* just once, didi. You won't find the like of it in the bazaar, didi.."

Sumati took the phial of *alta* from the girl and examined it carefully. Where had the girl picked up this sweet jangon, Sumati wondered. From her face she appeared to belong to a good family.

She put down the phial of *alta* along with the other items. A girl of a good family indeed ! Did girls of good families go knocking from door to door in this blazing heat purveying their goods.?

The girl picked up the phial of alta and asked, "Didi, don't you like it ? Just give it a try, didi. You'll see for yourself what wonders it can work ! How its colour will glow. Sheer brilliance !

"Didi, do you mind stretching out your leg ? I will apply some *alta* to it. A teeny-weeny application, didi." The girl poured a small quantity of the coloured stuff in a small pot.

"Here, let me have your left foot, didi,"she said.

"No, no, leave me alone. I don't want this messy stuff."

"Come on, didi. Let the younger sister apply some *alta* to her elder sister's foot."

Sumati pulled up her sari from over her ankle.

"Where do you hail from ? Calcutta ?" she asked the girl while she went about her job.

"Yes, didi, I come from Calcutta," the girl replied, drawing a thick red

line along Sumati's foot with a brush. "I've to roam all over the place in search of a living."

"Are you an employee of this company" ?

"Yes, didi."

"What have you studied ?"

"I'm a graduate, didi."

"A graduate ? And you move around all alone in such distant places ?"

"No, didi, I'm not alone. There are scores of other girls, all employed by the company."

Having finished with Sumati's foot she gently lowered it to the ground and went for her other foot.

"That'll do, "Sumati said, "I'll paint the other foot myself.".

"Do let me have your other foot, didi," the girl said in an imploring tone. "Back at home don't I apply *alta* to my mother's and sister's feet ?" She held Sumati's right foot in her hand.

"So you have your mother living with you," Sumati said, comfortably leaning back in her chair. " And who else ?"

"All of them are there, didi. My mother, father, two sisters, a brother."

"So your parents don't mind sending out a young graduate girl on a job of this nature?" Sumati asked hesitatingly.

"What good would their objection do, didi ?" the girl said without feeling peeved. "My brother is still too young to work. How long can a young girl live on her father's pension ? It is not fair."

She had said all this in a bland manner, shorn of any emotion. It seemed as if she was neither trying to vindicate herself nor holding it against her fate.

"Your *alta* is good, "Sumati said. "I'll buy it and use it on festive occasions."

"What's your name ?" Sumati asked the girl.

"Mona Biswas," the girl beamed.

"A lovely name. How much for this phial of *alta* ?"

"Where's the hurry, didi " Mona said and promptly picked up a box of *sindur.* "Please take a pinch from it."

"What's it ? *Sindur* ? I don't think I need it. Tell me the price of the *alta*. That's all I require for the present."

"Please extend your hand." Grabbing Sumati's hand Mona put some *sindur* on her palm.

"I don't require *sindur*. I've more than enough for my need".

"Don't I know it, didi ? You must be having plenty of it in the house, but..."

There was a smile on her face. She had to be careful of the girl who was clever enough to foist things on her against her wishes.

"Oh, god ! All right, give me that small box. Tell me its price and be done with it."

Taking out a new box, neatly covered with cellophane she held it before Sumati.

"You were recently married, didi, weren't you ?" Mona smiled at Sumati.

"Me ?" Sumati gave her a surprised look. "I've children who go to school. What made you think that I'm newly married ?"

"Really, didi ? Looking at your face, one wouldn't believe it."

Sumati intently looked at Mona's face. Did she really mean it or was she saying things just to flatter her ? But the girl had such an innocent and guileless face that she seemed incapable of fabricating lies.

Taking out another small box Mona said,"My elder sister has also a face like yours. Nobody believes that she is a mother of three children. When I first visited my sister her neighbours asked her if I was her elder sister."

Sumati knitted her eyebrows. "You still look like a young girl," she said. "Who says that you look old ?"

Mona's face lit up. "Oh, what nice things you say, didi," she said. "It makes me feel as if I am one of you."

This time Sumati thought that she must put the shutter down. "Oh, I'm getting late," she said. "I've so many chores. I will show you some more things, Mona said in a coaxing manner, insisted to have a quick look at them".

"I've already bought two of your things though I don't need them." Sumati put on a grave expression. "why look at something when I don't want it ?"

"It won't cost you any money, didi," Mona said in the same cloying tone. "These days one rarely comes across kind people like you."

Sumati's lips curled in a smile. How cleverly this Bengali girl talked.

Mona smiled, baring her beautiful even teeth. Then coquettishly inclining her head towards her shoulder she tried to force a bottle in Sumati's hand. "Pure *amla* hair oil, "she said. "Just have a look, didi. It's like ambrosia for the hair."

"I'm in a hurry. My children must be on their way back from school. I've got to get the food ready for them." But she had to take the bottle which Mona had almost forced into her hand.

Sumati casually turned the bottle in her hand. "Oh, the bottle costs Rs.11. It's written on the label. Expensive, isn't it ?"

"It's pure *amla* oil, didi. And they have added so many herbs to it. Excellent hair oil "

"Aren't you scared of going out alone, from house to house ?" Sumati asked.

"Now I have become habituated to it, didi. I no longer feel scared, "she said. "I've become inured to everything. Didi, once I step out of the house my fear vanishes."

Sumati gave Mona a puzzled look. She wondered how one could steel oneself against the fear the unknown.

Sumati was pondering over the prices. In fact she did not require any of these things, much less the costly hair oil.

Mona had quickly read her mind.

"Didi, I'm a poor sister of yours, "she said, smiling ingratiatingly. "You have a big heart. I knew it the moment I set my eyes on you."

"Do you have *mehendi* ?" Sumati suddenly asked.

"*Mehendi* ?"

"Yes, I've several times thought of dyeing my palms with it. But I don't know any reliable shop where they sell the genuine stuff."

"You are right, didi, "Mona said heartily agreeing with Sumati. "It is not a fast moving item with us. But since you need it I'll procure it for you."

"How long are you staying here ?"

"For the next two or three days. After that we shall move on to Bhilai."

Sumati went to her bedroom to fetch her bag. She decided that she would only make a token cut in the prices. After all the girl had helped her

while away the afternoon. Even otherwise she deserved to earn some money for her labour.

She suddenly stopped short in the narrow corridor. It was her husband, Dinesh's voice. She could see her husband's face from behind the curtain. He was scowling, wiggling his index finger at the things lying on the verandah floor. His blood always shot up at the sight of itinerant vendors. But Mona didn't look a bit scared. She was talking to him with perfect bonhomie, a small bottle held in her hand.

"So you have been buying things from this girl ?" Dinesh said as Sumati emerged from behind the curtain.

Before Sumati could speak, Mona forestalled her. "Didi, tell me are my things fake ? Dada, look at this perfume."

Putting a tiny drop on a cotton swab, Mona pulled Dinesh's hand and rubbed the swab on the back of it."Just smell it " she said. "It's *henna* perfume. Genuine, not artificial."

"Hum " he uttered as he took his hand to his nostrils. His face softened.

Sumati looked at Mona's face. A new face seemed to have superimposed itself on her swarthy face. A faint smile lurked around her pursed lips and in her innocent eyes there was a hint of playful coquetry. Holding her red bag in her hands she was gently swaying it to and for. Then one eyebrow imperceptibly went up. "Dada, it's pure *henna* scent. Surely you can't fault me on that. Buy a small phial of it."

Who was this unknown girl ? Only a short while ago she had come out with a long recital of her woes and Sumati had felt sorry for her. Now she was preening herself like a shameless hussy before her husband, unmindful of her darling didi.

And her husband ? Sumati looked at Dinesh's face. For a moment he had been caught in mental skirmish. His gaze had travelled to the girl's bosom from which her sari had slipped and seemed to have riveted there.

"You may buy anything that pleases you."he said to Sumati and strode into his room.

Flaring her nostrils Sumati settled Mona's account. If she wanted she could return all her things and pack her off. But then she realized it would be unbecoming of her to feel jealous of a petty girl like Mona.

Dinesh and Sumati were having their dinner. "How shameless these girls can be," Sumati said.

"Which girl are you talking about ?" Dinesh asked.

"The one who wanted to sell the scent to you, who else ?" But you ... to encourage them ?

"I know. But she was not one of those street vendors. She looked educated and knew her manners."

"Forget about her, " Dinesh said, getting up from the table. "She was a cheap girl. You don't know these girls."

"Oh, you know them all right. That's how you knew her for what she was the moment your eyes fell on her."

"Won't I know them ? I don't remain cooped up in the house like you. You can't see through these girls of easy virtue but I can."

Sumati lapsed into silence. But she kept reflecting over the matter far into the night long after Dinesh had fallen asleep. What did he mean by saying that she could not recognize a woman for what she was ? In his eyes were all women either decent housewives who remained confined within the four walls of their houses or cheap street walkers ? Sumati felt all the more sorry for Mona. The girl had endeared herself to her and won her confidence in the short time that she had been with her.

That night Sumati had a dream in which she found herself marooned on an island. Mona was standing somewhere nearby, unseen, wailing loudly that she stood in fear of falling into the water and being carried away by the surging waves. "Didi, help me " she cried again and again. As Sumati stretched out her hand, Mona grabbed it and held it so tightly that Sumati's feet staggered on that one square foot of land. "Let go of my hand, Mona " she cried out in utter desperation. "If you keep tugging at my hand I will fall into this fathomless water and perish."

Two days later, it being a Saturday, the children had returned from school early and Sumati was busy attending to them when she heard a knock on the door. It was Mona.

The horror of the nightmare had completely wiped out Mona's memory from Sumati's mind. In spite of a cold response to her greeting, Mona worked up her usual smile and said, "Didi, I've brought the *mehendi* for you."

"Oh, it was just a casual request. I didn't need it, really."

"So you don't want it, didi ?" The disappointment was clear on her tired face.

"Since you have brought it I may as well take it. How much should I pay for it ?"

"Fifty paise, didi."

Going into the house to get the money, Sumati wondered, why did Mona come back ? Whatever be the reason, she was not to be encouraged any more. No more small talk or friendly chit-chat. How much ground does she have underneath her feet that she would hope to build a bridge ?

Putting the 50 paise in her purse Mona said, "I must be going, didi. You have been so nice to me. I will cherish your memory. I rarely get so much affection from anyone. They just brush me aside."

Mona slowly receded from sight like mist dissipating under the sun. Why didn't she stop her ? She could have spoken a few words to her, asked her to give her regards to her mother. But she remained tongue tied, a prisoner of her own doubts and prejudices.

Tr. by Jai Ratan

THE COCOON

Hrusikesh Panda

"Looks like there will be a coup," Madhu Naik said. He unyoked the bullocks from his cart. The bullocks did not stir, as if they wanted to know more about the coup.

"What will you do then? You will close down your business? How will we live?" Jhumpuri, Madhu's wife, asked.

"Ha, silly," laughed Madhu, like a seasoned businessman, "all women are silly. Just wait and see, how my business prospers."

Madhu pondered on the political and economic uncertainty around him and was getting unnerved when two of his younger children fought over a piece of sweetmeat. The sweetmeat splintered into grains. The children raised a racket and Jhumpuri could not hear what her man said.

He went inside unwashed. The dingy pig never scrubs himself after returning from outside. At this moment, a log of wood burning outside and Markata, both, entered his head without knocking.

Madhu called out to Markata, in a voice that meant love and not lewdness. No response came. Those who knew this sombre voice quietened. Then he shouted: "Markata, where are you? Come here."

The bullocks swished away the mosquitoes with their tails; a sparrow flew off; Jhumpuri cocked her ear as she cooked her rice stew; the whining children fell silent. Madhu was relishing simultaneously the high of a ball of *madanananda* and his anger. His temper shot up and detonated through his mouth : 'Where is that hung-face Markata ?"

"Today again, I say," Jhumpuri fumed, "all right, we have seen enough of it already." Well, she said it to herself and got so sore that she poked the wooden ladle tenderly into her cooking pot.

Madhu's voice soared. He sprang up like a wound-up toy snake; stamped

his foot [no, he stepped about agitatedly] - he will set fire to the house; he will suicide Jhumpuri and divorce himself, oh no, he will divorce Jhumpuri and commit suicide himself; he will never again step into this house; he will deprive Markata of all rights to the property - his swearing tore apart the straw roof of his house.

The bullocks got bored and dozed off.

Markata was outside, in the dark, squatting on the unhitched cart. Madhu smashed a pot in the kitchen; the warm stew of mahua hooch sprayed his face. He swayed out of the house, intoxicated and angry, and screamed :"Why are you so unruly ?

Why are you so arrogant?"

Then he yelled for Markata and opened the door so violently, that a couple of lizards engaged in love-making at a corner of the frame of the door fell to the ground, scared, as if they were engaged in adultery.

Markata stayed put in the cart, unmoved, carrying on his shoulders his anger and shame, his wish for revenge and a eunuch's escape. When his father emerged from the entrance, he thought he would sneak off in the dark. But he did not go, because of sheer disgust, and asked, without getting up: "What is the matter?". Madhu's voice mellowed completely: "C' mon, you are here! Been looking for you since evening."

Markata was sought again at dinner. 'He is asleep,' someone murmured. "Wake him up, bring him here," said Madhu.

"Lo! he is asleep, why are you after him?" Jhumpuri said bitterly. Well, she said it to herself.

"Damn it," Madhu flared up, "Day in and day out, I deal with snakes and tigers, swindlers and dacoits for business. You mother-and-son stay back and put up funny shows."

Jhumpuri, who had always been her elder son's advocate, pleaded : "Look, he is sleeping. Why do you want to wake him up ?"

Markata staggered out of the room like a rooster flexing for a cockfight. Madhu looked hard at him: he had not gone to sleep. Madhu can see through humans. How else would he do business with tigers ? Tigers confront you on both sides. Up there are the wild tribal beasts; they don't care for your loss or gain. They don't react when they are cheated of entire crops from

acres of prime wet land; but they can kill you for a rooster or a bunch of plantains. Below the mountains are the prim and proper beasts. They can dismember you with their pen-nibs. Whom will you attend to ? These beasts here, or your accounts, or the four-footed tigers, or the touts and the dacoits and the thugs?

"Good times are coming ", said Madhu.

Markata affirmed this, so gently, that his brief monosyllable remained stuck in his mouth. Madhu puzzled about his son, his only son and yet to take an interest in work!

His voice softened.

"A coup is a golden chance for us. Put your mind to work a little, I can't manage alone. I mean, it is not about transacting in goods only, we might have to act as messengers, and you know how to carry information. This will help our business. Moreover, contacts and connections always help."

'No. I wouldn't send my son anywhere,' Jhumpuri wanted to interrupt him but decided to hold back till bedtime.

"I am leaving tomorrow," said Markata, his face hung over the rice stew.

"To the opera, again ?" Madhu sizzled with prickly heat pimples of anger that spread rapidly all over his body.

"No, to act in the opera. I have seen enough of your business now. You belong not here, nor there. Do you know how you are not trusted up there, atop the mountain? And below, in the valley, you are an untouchable! And in this village, who cares? Who shares his well being with others really? If you think that I am going to live this life through, then you are mistaken."

Markata had memorized these dialogues of the opera. But he realised that he could not deliver them with sufficient force. Moreover, should he deliver such serious dialogues in this backdrop, when his face is buried in the lukewarm rice stew and his form evaporating in the fog of his frustration, without a director, without any audience or lights or applause or concert ?

Madhu heard him. But he asked : "Why don't you speak

clearly ?"

Five pairs of eyes saw father-and-son.

"Where will brother leave for ? What is he saying ?" a pair of eyes asked.

"Both of them have gone crazy," another pair said.

"...," said the eyes of the twenty-year old unmarried sister who looked like a mother of three.

"My son will be a great man surely, hadn't the priest forecast this?" said another pair of eyes.

"Father is a rogue," another pair said.

"Let him go wherever he wants to. He will have to come back here ultimately," said one of the eyes of Madhu Naik. His other eye had a layer of cataract on it.

In the night, long after everyone went to sleep, Jhumpuri moved sacks of ragi and mustard and niger in the cellar and fished out the wooden chest underneath. She salvaged from the bottom of the chest a satchel of loose coins, and gave it to Markata.

"This is all I have, sweetheart," she said, "I have saved from the days of my mother-in-law and her mother-in-law. Don't take to heart what your father said. Take care. "

"Come back when you feel you are satiated."

Markata's voice moistened with a reluctant deluge and despite the engulfing darkness, two baby suns shone in his eyes.

The following morning Markata was not to be seen. The children were sobbing and Madhu had landed a couple of blows on each of them. He was waiting for Jhumpuri to burst into tears, so that he would deal a few blows to her and release his dejected anger. It had been long since he had beaten up Jhumpuri, what with grown up children in the house. Jhumpuri did drop a tear, but not before her husband; she wept in the cowshed while milking the cow and the milk carried the taste of salt, and she wailed again, while cooking rice stew, so copiously that her tears evaporated into waves of steam.

"How much money had you saved up behind me, bitch ? Mother-and-son! You are not jokers, you are traitors ! "

Jhumpuri turned back, picked up the pot of hot stew and said : "May the vampire take you, you gobbled up my son: I will kill myself with this hot gruel and send you to jail."

Well, she said it to herself. The pot of gruel fell to the ground. The stench of gruel hovered in the air for a full one month.

Markata trudged on. He left behind fierce mountains, crop fields in the mountains, rivers; not just rivers, but waterfalls. Before him lay the road; along the road, the police station and the post-office and the *tehsil* office and all that used to be inscrutable and terrible.

But today he is not scared at all. The weekly market is full of people. Markata had learnt many languages, as he accompanied father on business from hills to riverine lands to valleys to plains; when father bought and sold goods, when he cheated the customers, when he lied and carried back the profits with a mind sozzled in shame.

Young girls there, in that stall of flattened rice-and-nail polish-and -ribbons-and-trinkets. Feathery sunshine, light as the fragrance of *mahua* on the damp green leaves. A lad in a Love-me T-shirt black sunglasses squats there. Markata can't read the alphabets on his T-shirt - does not matter as l-o-v-e-m-e has been written all over the lad's face in all the scripts and sign languages of the world. Why does father get angry always and when Markata is not there, thump the earth and roar like king Kapilendra Dev ? And why does father calm down when he bumps into Markata and become so tender, like a tamed baby mongoose? And look at *ma*, whom he always counted on. She delivered children shamelessly even though Markata had reached the age when he should have married. Mother will never know that the most appropriate and abundant reason for his fleeing home was she. Markata twists his left palm with his right till the joints crack.

A commotion meanders from one end of the road on to the blabbering crowd. The crowd splinters into scurrying humans, leaving behind melons that could be shown at an exhibition, radishes tinier than baby rodents, abandoned sweet youngest daughters, bottles of fragrant hair oil and their papers of government loans. Markata stands in the middle of the road, alone, not because he feels unyielding or optimistic or like a hero, but because he is peeved thoroughly. I won't budge from here; let me see, he decides.

He dreams there, in the midst of that frenzied, lost melee : There will be arches open before him, beyond this maddening rush. Red and only red carpets would cover everywhere he treads on as someone would announce Here comes the King', and the guards on both sides will buckle down and then straighten up as he passes by.

Markata pushes through the fleeing crowd, like a cruel traffic island. The crowd suddenly disappears. An elephant it stopped before Markata like it met with its near and dear. It raised one of its forelegs and in that position, withdrew one of its hind legs and touched the ground with the raised leg. It then sat on its knees and raised the trunk up, groping for something. It collected the water-filled golden pitcher from the mahout and emptied it on Markata. An exquisite, fragrant gentleman looking like a sack of clarified butter, [and who was the Minister, as Markata knew later.] alighted from the palanquin, genuflected and bowed before him.

"Your Highness is our King," the minister said.

If Markata had not been a son of Madhu Naik, this event would have concluded like numerous fairy tales and tales of cursed Yakshas. But when the Court Priest came to consecrate him, his face paled, even in his saffron silk robes and even though the air was fragrant with sandal paste and myrrh and ghee - because, the priest had found out about the new king's pedigree by then. When the guards, according to the royal customs touched the feet of the new king, Markata heard the murmur of their dissent. When the women consorts in the ladies' quarters of the palace lay down on the ground before him, to welcome the new king into the palace, he thought they were staging a roadblock.

"Step over their backs, Rajan, for that is the custom of the palace," explained the Minister.

However, when at the end of the ritual, the women set out to have a holy dip to purify themselves, Markata proclaimed to himself :'Yes, I am an untouchable. Untouchable.' The palace had its own set of codes. The king had to wear long, rich apparels, and attendants had to dress him up. The palace was crammed with servants in attendance, always, while eating, relaxing, strolling, bathing, brushing teeth, or sleeping - rules and regalia everywhere. People thronged the space between bed and bedstead and bed sheet and bedcover, thickly like bedbugs, so thickly that it was difficult for the king to dream alone in sleep.

The palace started shedding its glamour in a few days after the coronation and the royal ladies in the palace resembled sundry rustic womenfolk. The palace appeared prosaic from within, though it still retained some hauteur. Markata became lonely in that sprawling mansion, and, to save himself

from the people around, often hid himself in the toilet. Ah, his misery did not end there. In the toilet too he had to answer persistent queries from an endlessly worrying royal lady-in-waiting: "Are you fine, Your Highness?"

He did not commit any significant mistake in administering, whether he handled infighting or free-food programmes or the court. But he always felt, as though someone was whispering into the air, this time you did it okay, but let's see what you do next.

When the post of the Chief priest of the royal temple fell vacant, the Court Priest, who relentlessly preached karmayoga, do your work and do not expect any result in return, with profuse emotion, suggested to the king that his son was the best choice for the post as this would immensely benefit the country and mankind. The Priest touched the feet of the king, while consoling himself: "After all Lord Vishnu had bowed before a donkey, didn't He?"

Once the monsoon wind turned dictatorial and blew capriciously. The farmers had to till their fields twice in one season. When the crop was young, flood swept the lowlands and drought, the highlands. When paddy was about to be reaped, a tornado blew the crops away. The minister requested the king to enhance the dearness allowance of the employees because of price hikes.

"This untouchable king begets these curses of nature!" soliloquised the minister then, and one widow, prostrating before the king to get back her land from the village moneylender, thought: 'Well! am I bowing to the son of Madhu Naik? I am bowing before the king.'

Markata learnt of a coup in the hills the day his nursery buddy Sudama called on him. Sudama spoke endlessly. Hey, do you remember, how we groped Reba when we played hide-n-seek with her? How a thorn of date palm pierced her foot, and how you howled when she was married off? And Chhanda, Gobinda, Sanatan - do you recall how Sanatan gobbled up one whole buffalo? Why should you, now that you are the King. Look, I am looking for a job. You can put in a word for me, somewhere. You can jolly well recommend my name. Should I prove each time that I am your friend?"

Blah blah blah...

After Sudama left, a spy informed Markata that a coup had taken place in the hills. An illegitimate brother of the ex-King had engineered it. Sudama,

who had in reality come as a spy, had been killed outside the palace by an unknown assassin.

The same night, Markata had a severe attack of asthma, that asphyxiated him, as if, his royal robes decollated him,. As if, his crown grew smaller and crushed his head.

As if, his shoes had spiked him. As if, there was not enough oxygen in the air, As if, the South wind denied him any space. As if As if.

He asked the lady-in-waiting of the bath, confused:"How do I look? I mean do I look any different now a days? " The palace breeze is making you blossom, Lord" said the lady-in-waiting, "Your Highness has turned the colour of milk-and-vermilion."

"Laughing at me, bitch, thought the King and said: "Don't tell anyone that I had asked this question."

The gait of the King became peculiar, as though someone had tied his legs with a thin thread. His face became spherical. Wishes matted inside his heart, so densely that had he flung them, they would have hurt someone.

One day, Madhu Naik was caught on the spot spying against the King. A hundred men of the royal army had died as a consequence of this. Madhu Naik was remanded to jail. The King himself was to be the Judge.

The people got agitated. "The untouchable will get his nose chopped off this time," proclaimed a courtier before his wife.

'The King has fallen ill' - news came.

"The King is looking for a way to let his father off. But the accused is caught on the spot, let's see how he can escape, " the minister quipped before the second lady.

"Lord!," the Court Vaidya said after examining the King, "This is no disease at all; Your Highness suffers from anxiety and confusion and will be alright with a little rest."

Then the court vaidya told the minister: "On the contrary, this could be serious. Of course, we know little about the king's disease, because, there has been no research on the subject, as not many royal patients have been available for study. Ah! God forbid."

An order was issued that; no one except the court vaidya can meet as long as the king was ailing. And then, he avidly was hounded by the courtiers

and the press. "The court avidly is on a mounavrata, he won't speak, "explained a colleague of the Vaidya.

Across the country, the atmosphere became tense. The wind paused a while before it began to blow, and pondered:"Am I not defying king's order?" "A sapling about to branch out mused: Am I breaking the Law of Prevention of Encroachment?" People became silent and solemn, and spoke in soliloquies, as though, their words would fly off like birds and disturb the slumber of the king. An evening star hesitated before twinkling, lest it should worsen the king's health.

A lot of good came out of this. The systems looked up; thefts and burglaries occurred only occasionally; the coup ended; revenue was collected and deposited on its own; the monsoon wind was perhaps frightened, for it no longer acted unruly. Let me exaggerate a bit: in a way things improved so much that there hardly was any urgent need for a king.

Years rolled by. Everyone got used to the king being ill. The court vaidya died one day.

As if, everyone was waiting for this! A contingent of high-level officials landed in the palace, without haste, to meet the King.

The personal security guard of the king said, he will not let anyone in without permission.

Whose permission ? The chief security guard was called in and it was decided that, in his presence only the minister and the general were allowed to meet the king.

A crowd outside. An unexpected anxious curiosity about the king.

The royal bedroom is tenebrous; humid-tepid odour of a room which had remained closed for years. "Why is the bedroom so dark, my Lord? Forgive us Lord, for we have entered without your permission. Lord, I am opening the window, permit me Lord !"

"Where is the king ? He is not here!"

A sea of subjects outside the palace.

"Lord! How are you feeling ? Are you feeling better?"

A window is opened. The king is covered from head to foot.

"Lord! I am your general. I need your signatures in a few files. A few

decapitations are to be carried out, your orders are required. Some executions have been carried out; your confirmation is necessary."

"Lord! I am your minister. The country is not running well, at all, no way Lord! Without your advice, governance is meaningless."

"Lord! I am your bodyguard! Please answer me, Lord, or else how do I know whom I guard?"

"(The king is not dead?)" The three-some kept their doubts suspended. The courtiers poked their faces into the bed. What covered His Highness was not a quilt; His Highness looked like a cocoon. The exterior is smooth and shining; head, abdomen, limbs can be discerned vaguely from the cocoon. There is a slight throb inside the cocoon. Perhaps a heart!

The king, the minister, the general and the bodyguard neither answered nor ordered. They sighed, closed the window and came out.

"Only kings can suffer from such grand diseases," said the minister with a special sigh. "Well, one consolation is that this is evidence of the royalty of the King. The personal life of the King is absolutely secret and above public scrutiny: I'll issue an ordinance to this effect today."

The bodyguard said: "This is extremely secret. Besides, we had gone without the permission of His Highness, and this act is liable for prosecution, even if we have done so in the greater interest of the country."

"Let it be," said the general. And realising that the great pancake, of kingdom and fiefdom and court, containing many varieties of fillings, cannot be shared anymore, he let out a long sigh, as if he exhaled every bubble of humid and tepid air from his body.

Tr. by Lipipuspa Nayak

EXISTENCE

Sarojini Sahoo

Waking up from sleep Suparna went to the bathroom, and from the window there saw the sight. It was very early in the morning. The sun was not up. The yellow truck of the company stood at the side of the road that went down towards the New Incline - only ten to fifteen metres away from the backyard of her house. Five to six khaki -clad men sat on chairs in the middle of that road. A good deal of curiosity, however, did not arise in her mind seeing this sight.

So she went to the kitchen as in all other days, and lighted the stove to make tea. She could still see the sight from the window in the kitchen while she placed the pot of water on the stove for making tea, the same yellow truck, the Khaki-clad men, and a few onlookers on the spot. No curiosity rose in her mind this time too. Sitting in the bedroom and enjoying tea in a relaxed mood, Aniruddha and she talked about the different kingdoms they travelled in their dreams last night. Aniruddha hardly saw dreams. But Suparna saw dreams every night. During the tea-time Suparna talked about these different kingdoms, in which she met Mr. Reagan and her father in her small quarters; saw the lanes and by-lanes of Calcutta when she came out of it; and the grocery shop in her father's town - all mixed up in one environment. When this idle talk ended, she would get up and busy herself in the daily chores. She did the same today also.

While she cleaned the water-tank in the courtyard, she saw the sight again through the gap between the wings of the door at the backyard. Still cleaning the tank she loudly addressed Aniruddha, "Hey, come and see why there is a truck here? There are some police men also."

Though he heard it, Aniruddha did not move as if he had not heard it at all. Suparna too did not repeat it. Aniruddha got up from the bed after about ten or fifteen minutes; went to the bathroom; returned and wondered aloud," Perhaps there has been an accident there.'

Suparna, while washing the dishes, said, "No. I don't think it is an

accident. Is there not a check-post there? Go and see if some goods, illegally transported, have been confiscated."

Opening the door at the backyard Aniruddha said," This truck belongs to the company. Certainly it has caused an accident."

Suparna got up from the place where she washed the dishes, and stood near Aniruddha. After both of them just remained standing there for some time, Suparna said," Can you see how a man clad in blue pant and white shirt has fallen on the road with his face to the ground ?"

"Where? I can't see," Aniruddha asked Suparna moving a little from the spot where he stood.

"There, at the back of the truck. Look a bit towards the right side. Has not a man fallen there with his face to the ground in the pose of doing a Pranam ? Blue pant and white shirt?"

Though the event occurred only ten to fifteen metres away, neither Aniruddha nor Suparna went forward to know what was the real cause of occurrence. After some time, when they turned back closing the door at the backyard, Aniruddha saw Kalu Pahelwan, the security - guard of the area clad in khaki and holding his small stick, walking hurriedly by the backyard, and he asked him: "Pahelwan, what has happened there?"

"Sir, there has been an accident. You know K D. Singh of your line. His son's head is wholly crushed under the wheel."

Aniruddha paused for a moment uttering, "Oh! Did the accident occur this very morning?"

Not in the morning, it occurred at 9 o 'clock in the night."

"9 o'clock in the night?" Aniruddha asked in surprise," Why did the boy go there at 9 o'clock in the night?"

There was some reason for Aniruddha to be surprised in this way. New Incline was about three to four kilometres away from here. No quarters were constructed there yet for people to live in. Besides, this road of three to four kilometres went through a jungle of bushes - there was no human habitation.

Walking away Kalu Pahelwan said," Who knows why did he go there at 9 o'clock in the night?"

Looking at Suparna Aniruddha said," It must be a case of suicide."

"Are you omniscient ?" Suparna made fun `Aniruddha, returning to wash the dishes.

A boy was dead in an accident. Again, he lived in their line of quarters.

Yet Aniruddha did not rush out to see him knowing all this. Nor did Suparna. Aniruddha went to the toilet, as usual, for half an hour with a book and a packet of cigarettes. When he came out, he shaved his beard. Sitting at the dining table he wrote down a couple of letters, while he waited for Suparna to bring the breakfast. Suparna also, as usual, prepared the breakfast nicely. She put in the pocket of Aniruddha's shirt that he meant to wear, a small piece of paper carrying a list of fish, lemon, coffee to get. She went happily into the garden seeing the yellow rose in bloom from the bedroom window.

After Aniruddha went to the office, Suparna in between her cooking came out many times and stood outside, opening the door at the backyard on hearing women talking loudly. But she could not ask anybody anything as many of the women were not known to her. The one or two who were familiar, it was doubtful if she talked with them once or twice in a year.

Though Suparna has lived in this colony for three years, except the families in four quarters in her line and four in front she knew nothing about the rest of the thirty-two families : Who came out from which of the quarters, who was whose son, who was known by what name - she knew nothing. People gave *prasad* to her returning from holy pilgrimage, but Suparna would not know the person who gave the *prasad*. If there was a Satyanarayan Puja, people invited her to come in the evening, but Suparna would not know to whose house, to which of the quarters she had to go on invitation.

She only knew this much that there were many persons in this colony from Uttar Pradesh. Almost everyone was a relation of the other in some way. They had names like Abodhraj, Tilakraj, Bansharaj, Rajeshwar, Rameshwar and almost all had Singh for surnames. Suparna could not imagine who amongst them might be K.D. Singh.

At the back of the house, Kalu Pahelwan's son stood amongst the group of women. As he lived in the quarters in front of hers, he was known to Suparna. Addressing him Suparna asked, "Hey, Hari ! How old was the boy?"

"He was reading in class nine. Don't you know?"

Suparna shook her head negatively. He turned towards the road saying, " The boy lived in your line." Meanwhile the police jeep, the company jeep, and the cameraman had arrived. The crowd had become bigger than before.

Completing the daily chores and taking her bath, Suparna came out from the front side of her house about half past ten. From the crowd, that gathered on the road at the back, the boy was already taken away in a jeep for post-mortem. Except the truck, there were no people or policemen. Suparna came to the gate to see if there was any crowd in front of any of the quarters. But she could not see any except groups of people talking on the road. No, there was no crowd in front of anybody's quarters.

Slowly those groups of people also went away leaving the road empty. Suparna could not know where. What sort of a person K.D. Singh was ? Was he that weak man with semi -white beard ? Suparna thought, "No, that man should not be K.D. Singh." She had imagined him all these days as Abodhraj.

K. D. Singh must be that quiet person in his forties who moved his feet only when he walked; his body, hands, face and eyes remaining absolutely still - one whom she had never seen laughing who wore black half-pants and check -shirt when he went under the ground in the colliery - who carried the helmet in his left hand, and the stick in his right - who would go out in a stroll on holidays wearing a pink Punjabi and perfectly white, fine dhoti. Was he that man?

Suparna saw almost all the boys of the colony sitting on the heap of sand in front of the quarters newly being constructed. They must be fourteen to eighteen years in age. She knew three or four amongst them - she knew them well. Occasionally, Aniruddha would ask them to get cigarettes for him and she would ask them to get a few curry leaves from someone's garden. Apart from them, she recognized the rest by coming across them daily. They would all call her 'aunty' when they came to her to collect subscriptions on this or that occasion. They would come and sit in the drawing room like her own relations, without seeking any permission, when there would be the Asiad or the Olympic to watch on the T.V.

Though Suparna would not be able to say how many boys exactly lived in this line of quarters in the colony, she could distinguish one from the other, like different photographs, according to their faces and build.

Perhaps that is why she could immediately mark that the tall and thin boy who walked like Amitav Bachan was not present there amongst the boys sitting on the heap of sand. Was it then he, who was crushed under the truck ... Suparna looked at the boys again carefully. Because

Suparna had flatly refused the boys of the colony once to watch her T.V., that tall boy would always open the gate of their garden stealthily, and run away - did that boy come under the truck?

Coming inside the house Suparna read some story - book lying on the bed, and thought, "Do they really cut the body into pieces during the post-mortem?" Few years back a friend of hers had committed suicide jumping into the well. And they had seen her, after the post-mortem, cut into pieces. It was the same story, when her aunt killed herself taking poison.

Reading the book, Suparna wondered, "What would happen to the poor driver? Would he be suspended? Would there be a case against him? The one who dies, perhaps escapes. The one who survives, suffers. No?"

Reading the book, Suparna thought," The boy died on a holy day like *Janmastami*, Whether he went to Heaven or not, one does not know. But he died on a holy day. Surely the boy was a virtuous being."

Suparna came out putting down the book. The road was empty. Surprisingly, there were no hawkers. After standing there for some time, she saw a man coming from a distance in a hurry. Was this man then K.D. Singh? The man came nearer. He wore a grey safari suit, and carried a vermilion mark on his forehead. She had seen this man many times in the colony. He was a man who definitely belonged to this colony. But he must not be K.D. Singh. Suparna felt so somehow, when he came near her. No, this man must not be K.D. Singh. If he were K.D. Singh, he could not have carried a vermilion mark on his forehead knowing that his son was dead. This man could not be Marshall, the absurd man of Camus. He must not be K.D. Singh, how much worried he looked.

The man passed by. But Suparna continued to stand on the verandah. She thought of asking the woman of the house next door, when she would come out, how did K.D. Singh look like?

After some time, Suparna saw that man, whom she guessed as K.D. Singh from the beginning, was coming towards her. His feet moved; but his body, face, eyes - all motionless. That man wore today a *lungi* and *genji*. Suparna waited till the man came near. No, the man was not on duty today. He had neither the helmet nor the stick in his hands. The man came very slowly. When he came near, Suparna saw that he held a *bidi* between his lips and he exhaled smoke from his nose." Could this man ever be K.D. Singh?" Suparna asked herself . " Impossible!" Could someone go about like this smoking *bidi* whose son was dead? Whether one was grief -

struck or not, were there not all the hassles of the police, the post-mortem, the rites and rituals of burning the dead body? This man must not be K.D. Singh. Suparna closed the door and came inside. No, this man must not be K.D. Singh.

Since the fall of the evening there was absolutely no sound in the colony. It seemed midnight, though it was just half past seven. Returning from the office Aniruddha was reading a newspaper near the T.V. without any trace of a worry. The sound of the T.V. was put in low volume.

Suparna lay on the bed in the bedroom. The air was humid, and it was very uncomfortably warm. Perhaps due to low voltage the air that the fan blew could not even touch the body. Suparna had noticed that the colony seemed deserted since the fall of the evening. There was no loud sound from the radio from any of the houses. There were no children running about noisily on the road in the evening. The gang of the sixteen-year-old boys also seemed stunned. Though the gang sat, as usual, on the culvert at the side of the road, no one talked, No one came out to sing a film-song loudly. People on the road, too, walked hurriedly straight towards their homes as if it was no longer safe to walk on the road.

Suparna became restless, got up, and told Aniruddha in the drawing room, "It is very hot. Shouldn't we have a walk for a while outside."

"Wouldn't you go out?" It seemed from his face that Aniruddha had no desire to go out. As it were compelled, he put down the newspaper, and got up.

"Let's go then."

They came out and walked on the road for quite a distance in silence. Aniruddha opened his mouth first," Does not the colony seem rather dark today?"

Suparna did not answer the query. After a few moments, she asked, "Would K.D. Singh get compensation? I hear so."

"Every one says that the boy committed suicide. How can compensation be given? But the man K.D. Singh is a miser. He would certainly tell the police that his son has not committed suicide. But the company would try to prove it to be a case of suicide."

Suparna walked on wondering about these words for some time suicide, miser, company, case; then paused when Aniruddha suddenly said." Let's go back" and she turned back.

How did the man K.D. Singh look like? The boy who died, how did

he look like? He lived in this colony. Must have passed by many a time in front of Suparna's house. Must have shaken the colony with the gang of sixteen year old. wandering about it and shouting. Must have been with the boys who came to collect subscription for the Ganesh Puja the other day. Must have come to watch the T.V. and sit in Suparna's drawing room. Yet Suparna could not really identify the boy in her mind. As if the boy never existed for Suparna. It was indeed surprising.

Returning home Aniruddha felt relieved, switched on the T.V., and sat down again to read the newspaper. Suparna went back to the bedroom. The dead boy never existed for Suparna. Neither Aniruddha nor Suparna had shown any interest getting the news in the morning of the boy committing suicide. Yet the boy became, as it were, very close to her in just one day, after his suicide.

Suparna had seen the corpse with his face to the ground in the morning from afar. What did he wear - blue pants or *lungi* ?

In the afternoon, Suparna had seen only a yellow Leyland truck standing loaded with coal. There were none, nothing - the corpse of the boy, the Police or the people except the truck loaded with coal on the deserted road. The truck must be there even now. A lone truck in the lonely darkness of the night.

Absentmindedly. Suparna went near the window and tried to see the spot. There was no truck. Could it be true ? Where did the truck go from here? With curiosity Suparna came out, and stood on the verandah. No. the truck was not there. In which spot did the accident occur? Now it was not possible to even see the spot in the dark.

Suparna came inside again. Drawing room, bedroom to dining space, store, and the verandah outside the kitchen. Again the drawing room, again the bedroom, again the kitchen. Suparna moved about as if in search of some lost thing. Had she lost something? What was that? The boy was alive last night. Seeing the truck today one knew the boy had committed suicide on some particular spot. But the sign of the boy seemed erased right from now. Suparna could not understand where was the grief? Was there any proper cause for her to grieve ?

Tr. by Rabi Shankar Mishra

A GAME OF WORDS

Jayanti Rath

The word ' irony ' has been associated with my fate right from my birth till date, at each step. Given this, why should I get perturbed over the very mention of this word?

Didn't I tell you, it's right from my birth?

I am the fifth child of my parents. I was born in a hospital which my mother dreaded most. On the insistence of her near and dear ones she was admitted to the hospital; their argument was that she was not keeping well with each of her delivery in the village. But how could it happen that I didn't cry (for quite some time) after I was born? I was born weak. My shape deterred others from taking me to their laps. But none of my elder brothers and sisters had any defect with them although the mid-wife in the village helped my mother in her delivery. Whoever saw me in the hospital had their doubts about my longevity. My mother put up with all this in her lone, painful moments.

Many things have happened which indicate contradictions between my shape and speed, existence and composure. It is not just how many times they have happened but influentially how they have been in making me an introvert.

Take for example, this little incident. I was a student of class IV. My uncle in Calcutta had sent me an umbrella overlaid with the print of toys and flowers. At that time none in the school had such an umbrella. The aggressive desire to startle everyone with that object of wonder however could never materialise. It never rained during my school time. If it rained in the morning, it was a holiday or due to some reason or other the school remained closed. And the days I got wet while coming from the school had such clear mornings that I never felt the need to take the umbrella with me. Restless at not getting the opportunity of taking the umbrella to school, one cloudy day I did take that umbrella to school. I enjoyed the wonder and curiosity that my classmates showed at my umbrella. I met all their queries

regarding the umbrella with great satisfaction. But that day I cried all the way home because when the breaktime was over and I returned to my seat I found my umbrella missing.

I had love for literature. In my childhood. I had read along the voluminous complete works of Radhanath, Fakirmohan, Nandakishore and Gangadhar. I am not sure whether I understood them or not. Those readings created in me strange notions which further opened up their branches Coming to know their wants and sufferings I thought that classics like theirs could only be possible from deep sorrows. At that time, unawares, I had prayed suffering for myself. For that was the time when sorrow meant to be scolded in the classroom by the maths teacher, or to have missed the opportunity to take part in the drama to be performed in the annual function day of the school.

At that time, like an earthquake cracking up the earth, a sudden thunder broke the backbone of our family. One day a jeep filled with people pulled up before our house. No,that was not the jeep by which my father had gone on tour. When the people got down from the jeep, one after another, with my father's luggage that he had taken with him on tour, I almost jumped in happiness. As there were so many people I could not dare to rush towards the gate. I thought perhaps father was enjoying the scene in delaying to come out of the jeep. I had then no maturity to read sadness on the faces of those people. My father's orderly was the last one to come out of the jeep with a basket of mangoes on his head. He almost threw that on the verandah and burst out in tears. Yes, following him, father's dead body covered with a cloth was taken out of the jeep. While returning from the tour he had died of road accident and that was ten or twelve hours ago. His body was still fresh. Perhaps he was content with the thought that he would startle us with the taste of delicious mangoes.

Till today whenever I take a bite of delicious mango that fresh face of my father seen for the last time flashes before my eyes and a number of sad notes run electrifying my body.

Needless to say from that day onwards my life has been in the grip of sorrow and suffering. Orphaned at the age of fourteen and to face the world without any means of subsistence was like being without warm clothes in the shivering cold or like without a shade in the scorching heat of summer, or without a roof in rain and storm.

I had no courage to be with my friends on festive occasions.

I had no zeal to go to the house of friends and relatives. My poverty and misery prevented me from joining them.

My instinct did not tell me even though I was hard pressed. to approach the high officials who were my acquaintance for a job. nor had I the skill to do so.

Thus. innumerable doors of sorrow opened before me.

In my sorrowful eyes. every little thing, little incident got magnified. Big looked the dead velvety ladybugs trampled underfoot. the petals of a wilted flower. colour of the worn out leaf. the shadow of a distant mountain. Clearly audible was the voice of a river flowing lonely. The words of sorrow were hard nuts to crack. Sometimes lines of poetry occurred quite naturally. They would come in the night before the examinations when I would be concentrating on the cutting of my nails. Those pieces of paper which bore the lines of my poetry in my own handwriting were blown as far away as onto the branches of a guava tree. or on the topmost rung of a ladder. People coming to my house talked of it and I was delighted to hear them say that there were unmistakable streaks of poetry in me. I became eager to see those words in print. I collected those poems and submitted them to journals.

Days passed. even months. Restlessly I flipped through the poetry pages of the journals I had submitted. I grew desperate waiting for the mail. My poems never got published. Never a complimentary copy reached me.

The stains of failure and futility found their way to the altars of my sorrow. I lost the spirit to write. I took myself away from the creative world. rather willingly.

I spent my days with my classmates in the college just whiling away the time. Sometimes we would go to the nearest eatery for tiffin. One such day. when I was eating from a fold of an oily paper. under a tree. I discovered my name printed on that. Below the name was my poem. which was most dear to my heart. I could not believe myself and was motionless for a few seconds. Without uttering a word to anybody about that I tucked that piece of paper in my purse. In their merriment my friends could not notice it. Reaching home I carefully unfolded that paper and almost devoured my poem. although it had been shredded. On one side of the paper was printed

my poem, and on the other side the handwriting of a novice listing out groceries such as tea powder, bathing soap, snow, perfumed oil etc.

Whose strange hand was that which wedded my dearest poem to an erroneous list of groceries?

Time was hard with me. I had given up writing poetry and my notion that sorrow was the mother of all art underwent change. At that time those poets and writers who enjoyed popularity were sick, poor and suffering ones like Gangadhar or Laxmikanta. On the contrary, they had plenty.

For some days, I had grown morose at the death of my poetry. I had questioned myself, again and again: who was it who turned me away from my poetic consciousness, from the luxury of my world of imagination? Was it I? Or time? Or some invisible fate?

Even in this middle-age I am being ridiculed by my fate. Like, working sincerely in the same post for a long time. There at last came a good time when my name was recommended for promotion but that recommendation could not be traced from the file in the Directorate. After much effort when at last that recommendation was traced the government issued notices to the effect that unless there was any expediency there would be no fresh appointments or promotions. Needless to say, in such a period of financial stringency of the government my promotion was redundant.

Another event of such nature had occurred a long time ago. At that time in the entrances to the medical colleges there was viva-voce. I had secured high percentage in matriculation and university examination and also did well in *viva-voce*. Sure of getting a seat, the very day I sat for the examination I went to my village, 300 kms. away from my college. I waited and waited for the admission card, which never came. When I could not wait any longer I came back only to find that all the admissions had been over. I reeled under helplessness and despair, yet no one from the institute came to my rescue. I had to stomach all the digs, which came coated with sympathy. They were: "You should not have been so careless", "all these are phases of career-making", "and you should have come time and again" "How could you wait there at your home so long"?

Name it my ill fate or carelessness, but it changed the course of my career, my occupation.

If at all anybody boasts before me, a spontaneous sharp pain flashes on my lips. The sapling of boastfulness lay dead within me since long.

Maybe, that could never be rectified or forgotten before I die. Given this, how can I take in the pride, the smell of ego of somebody else?

Yet, whenever I am reminded of the irresponsible actions of the authority in the medical college due to which many brilliant students could not get admission; the pale face of that helpless girl on the corridors of the college flashes before me and I, full of compassion, start caressing, consoling her.

These days my heart goes out to anybody who is deprived of his or her dues from the government. But I am helpless, as I have no power to remove all these obstacles, to block all the unwanted incidents.

Yes, I have not come to my point. My elder sister Khukididi was given in marriage when I was barely eleven or twelve. From that day onwards my mother had started making provisions for my marriage. Of course, the sudden demise of my father stopped her for a while. Wresting herself free from the sorrow, she once again went on collecting utensils for my marriage. Wherever she found leisure she opened that big box that contained all her procurements. Obviously, looking at them she found satisfaction. Thinking of her feelings of that time I feel tears well up in my eyes. Why did god grow so cruel towards her? Why could not her dreams for her youngest daughter materialise at all?

I did not lack any of the qualities required of a daughter to get married. I was certainly an attractive girl with my light, brown skin, deep eyes and deep black hair. Or else why should my colleagues would have been jealous of me even when I was in my late youth? Why should have I tolerated all the bad words against me?

Nobody knew for sure why I could not marry. It is said that my zodiac signs were not favourable for my marriage. Many of my marriage proposals were cancelled on this ground. Of course, in these days of love marriage, inter-caste marriage, inter-religion marriage all this sounds ridiculous. Reminded of it, even today I cannot help laughing at it. I pity my mother. How credulously she resigned herself to her fate, taking the words of the astrologers for granted ? She broke down. She could not think of any alternative to it.

The day I left my mother, family, homestead land and home for my job, my mother embraced me and burst into tears. She could not control herself anymore when she noticed me taking out the most beautiful silver

glass from among her collected articles. Today I think, why did I hurt her like that on the day of my departure ? Why did I cruelly lacerate her failure?

Was my mother solely responsible for my spinsterhood? She was widowed at the age of forty. She had to bring up five children in terrible hardship. Constantly passing through crisis and tension she had become weak and sickly. She had no strong financial support nor any supportive relative. What could have she done? She was a lone walker on the sands of sadness.

And once I had a job could she have hindered me had I selected someone of my choice? Somehow, during the initial years of my service, I could not develop fascination towards any man. Why did I always look at the dark side of anyone I came across? Why couldn't I indulge in the dream of a happy married life?

That is why perhaps I am destined to lead a life without a husband, a family of my own.

It is long since that I have become still and placid like the rippleless surface of a pond. But each morning I sit down to worship my favourite God, Srikrishna, the first thing to come to my notice is the silver glass that I have been using for years to keep water separately for worship, the one which my mother had dreamt of using to offer water to the son-in-law of her youngest daughter.

These days when a friend of mine asks me to accompany her to the market to buy materials for her daughter's marriage, sorrowing moon shows itself in my dark sky. I invent excuses to decline their invitation.

It is not that those who have been the victims of their fate like me are few. I know of one such mother who is middle-aged and has lost two of her educated, well established sons in the interval of one and a half year and is presently leading a miserable life bearing the atrocities of her youngest scoundrel son. Also, I know of an astrologer who was sure to live a life of hardship and incompatibility went for a second marriage. Knowing that he was diabetic, he did not refrain from taking thickly boiled milk. At his deathbed none of his two wives and eight children were present. The only one to be present there was his eighty-year-old mother. The house he had built with his hard-earned savings was litigated and he died in his dingy mud house in his native place.

It pains me a lot to think of these incidents. Yet I know it is not that easy 'to accept stoically one's cruel fate but then one has to struggle to reach towards a life of ease. These days when I get a letter I do not become restless to open it. Rather. I get anxious : does it bear the passion and suffering of Khukididi who is oppressed by her pervert husband? Does it bear the news of my brother's insolvency (for whose bank loan I was a guarantee)? Entangled with such ill thoughts I skip the message contained in the letter. But there was a time when I used to lean against the gate, eagerly waiting for the postman.

Today picnicking on the seashore along with my neighbours, we sat under the casuarinas and I played with the children a game of words. Who had asked me to enter their game with Pintu, Digu, Meena. Sheela and Rahul? I should have kept mum when Pintu failed to recollect another word beginning with an I'. But suddenly the word 'irony' slipped form my tongue. Stubborn as Pintu always is, he insisted on its meaning: "What does it mean, aunty?"

Now, how can I make him understand the meaning of the word 'irony?' This word has been so intricately intermingled with my fate and life that I failed to fish out a few words to illustrate its meaning.

I pretended to be absentminded, not to have heard his question at all. Let their word game crumble up. I feel no need to hurt myself anymore with my own words.

Tr. by Rabindra Kumar Swain

AND.....SUNDOWN, GRADUALLY

Susmita Bagchi

"The story goes back to the time of creation. Lord Brahmha allotted life spans of fifty years to each of the creatures on earth. Man was the last to arrive to claim his share of allotment. The creator had only twenty-five years left with him. Man was disappointed and he sulked. But Bramha pleaded helplessness. Said he, 'I am sorry; I cannot do anything for you now. Get in touch with the others. May be, they would condescend to gift you a moiety of the life span allotted to them.' The first creature man met was the horse. Man entreated, 'Look here; Lord Brahma has allotted me a very short life span. Would you mind gifting me some 'years' out of your share?' The horse readily agreed and gifted twenty-five years out of its share. Greedy man! Not contented, he next went to the dog and then to the monkey. They both gifted twenty-five years each out of their own span of life. Man then went back to the Creator and recounted the outcome of his visits. The Creator wore a smile on his face as he said, 'Congratulations! I am glad you got what you wanted. But then you need to be forewarned on the future course of your life. The first twenty-five years of your life you will live like a man; the next twenty-five years of your life you will labor hard like a horse; the next twenty-five years you will spend barking like a dog and the last twenty-five years you will be an object of mockery and your gestures will be made fun of like those of a monkey."

His narrative completed, Aniruddha made a survey of the faces of his listeners. But he noticed no change in the countenance of the group of four. May be, they treated the story merely as a story; or may be, they understood its implications but feigned incomprehension. This enraged Aniruddha instantly. His exceedingly fair face reddened; his eyes narrowed to a pinhole; his brows shot inches upward on his forehead and his breathing became faster. The familiar rage - syndrome was duly recognised as he addressed his companions.

None of you got me! You need more exposition, don't you? A posture of the tactful dim-wit, eh?'

Aniruddha paused momentarily before he shriek-hissed the moral of his story at his companions.

" I AM A M...O...N...K...E...Y ! EVERY ONE OF YOU IS A MONKEY ! WE ARE ALL MONKEYS ! Have I made myself clear now?"

The group had no need for any further elucidation. However, Sadananda attempted to pacify him.

"Aa ha ha! Let go Aniruddha Let go Aniruddha! Getting excited on a mere story! It does not suit your age. Do not invite a cardiac arrest for nothing, Aniruddha !"

Aniruddha looked pointedly at Sadananda and then turned his ocular beam on the entire group even as he puffed at his cigarette.

A heroic attempt at digression. No? Tell me friends, whether my description has not been an apt one. Are you not made fun of everywhere you go? Me? My case is slightly different, though. I am not a domestic animal like you; my tormentors are strangers in the market place, whom I can afford to ignore. But you,...heh! heh!..... you are monkeys in your own houses. Your sons and daughters-in-law make fun of you as do your daughters and sons-in-law; not to speak of the horde of grandchildren! You certainly will bear me out, Kedar Bhai."

Thus addressed directly, Kedarnath paled visibly. As if among the group, his cup of sorrow overflowed. His wife had departed to the other world twelve years ago. And for his daughters-in-law, he had become unwanted for a long time now. The fact that the house they lived in belonged to him, and that they lived comfortably there had been conveniently forgotten by each one of them. The three grandsons were always a menace to his composure at home; one would make faces at him while another would suddenly snatch away his spectacles and vanish. What irritated Kedarnath the most was that none in the family ever bothered to discipline them. When one's own flesh and blood, the sons chose to keep a distance, why blame the daughters-in-law who are not blood relations anyway? Kedarnath sighed and remained silent. After all these years,what else was left to talk about ?

But Aniruddha had not finished yet. He said with passion, "If I had

the opportunity of coming face to face with Lord Brahma but once, on behalf of my fellow-humans on this planet I would offer my profound apologies to him and pray 'O Lord! Forgive us. Do not chastise us for the sins of greed perpetrated by our ancestors. We no longer wish to live on borrowed life-spans; let us live our lives as humans only."

Aniruddha stopped for a while and then continued, "No, none of these would happen; neither the Lord shall appear before me nor can I open my heart before him. There is no end to this existence full of indignity and a sense of futility; only Death, yes, only Death could put a stop to the torment that is human life."

Had Aniruddha not been absorbed in his own soliloquy, he would undoubtedly have noticed how, with the mention of Death, his companions' aging process instantly hastened; they were suddenly older by ten-twelve years.

Lalitnarayan who had been listening for so long, now spoke slowly as if to console himself.

"Leave it, Aniruddha. Whatever will be, will be. The end of life is inevitable and there is absolutely no point in dwelling on it or entering into arguments about it, before the time comes; no point absolutely in jamming one's mind with stray thoughts."

Startled, Aniruddha stared at him closely. His facial muscles hardened and he threw a challenge at Lalitnarayan, as it were.

"Why not? By God, why not? Are you afraid, Lalitbhai?"

"Not at all! I mean, what is there to be afraid of?

Aniruddha sensed his discomfiture, and acted generous.

"I am beginning to have a feeling of pity for the bunch of you!" And he continued in a tone that betrayed a double meaning.

"Have you ever observed a brood of chickens waiting to be wrung by the neck? The time that they spend together is spent in ceaseless feud over the feed placed before them. The amazing part of the show is that, even when some of their companions are removed in ones and twos to be slaughtered others continue to feud and squawk over the feed, absolutely unconcerned. They deliberately refuse to think about their imminent death. Shameless creatures!"

Whether the sarcasm was directed at the chickens or at his own friends was not immediately clear to the blurred perceptions of the com-

pany. And although it was not yet the time to call the session off, the members of the group unceremoniously drifted homeward, excusing themselves making very flimsy pleas.

The main road connecting the women's college and the hospital is flanked by a Shiva temple on its left. Behind the Shiva temple a narrow alley leads to their settlement four furlongs away. The colony nestles away from the din and the traffic jam of the town. Once there, one also pleasantly misses the thick layer of over-head smog found elsewhere in the town. A lungful inhalation of the fresh air makes one instantly aware of the unspoilt nature around him.

It was not that their houses lay very close to one another. But, since their first exploratory acquaintance with similar attitudes, the need for getting together had been felt by all of them. They had accordingly sought out a venue for the assembly. As one entered the colony, beyond the first two by lanes and at the entrance to the third there was the children's park. There, inside it, one came across five or six wooden benches by the compound wall. They had opted for the longest bench under the leafiest Krushnachuda tree, as a resting-point after their morning promenade. And to this point each day, before the sun rose to flush the morning sky with a riotous red, they all converged.

They? Yes: they were five; five friends- Banabehari, Kedarnath, Sadananda, Lalitnarayan and Aniruddha. Their club did not have a name but the local people had mockingly named it the 'Ashia Sabha' or 'The Club of the Octogenerians'. For, excepting Aniruddha, all the others had crossed their eightieth year. Only Aniruddha was in his seventies; Seventy-six to be precise. But then he possessed certain qualities of leadership, which the others in the group did not fail to recognise. For that reason, he was not a mere member of the Club; he was its quietly acknowledged *de facto* President.

The normal daily duration of the club's sitting was two hours, barring days when it rained. But when any member was taken ill (ordinarily a rare occurrence), the venue shifted to the indisposed member's residence where the session warmed up to the accompaniment of hot tea and biscuits.

If one came to think of it, a stretch of two hours appeared quite prodigal. But then the old men had so much to remember during their sessions that the two hours usually passed unnoticed till the bell of the nearby

lower primary school signalled the dispersal time and they grudgingly moved homeward with the unspoken promise to meet , the next day.

One might wonder at the wide variety of topics discussed by members of the Ashia Sabha; but then members' garrulity was to be heard to be believed. Even the members themselves lost count of time once the talks veered to the children or other kin of their respective families. Only Aniruddha remained outside the circle of this obsessive interest. They were all aware of the factors which made him indifferent to these matters and hence, rather than get annoyed, genially tolerated his cynically acerbic comments. They all were generously compassionate in their understanding of the situation of their President. A lifelong celibate and without siblings he had led a fairly lonesome life and it would have been unreasonable, therefore, to expect him to appreciate the pulls of family ties. Aniruddha himself, though, was not conscious of any deprivation. On the contrary, he chose to live within himself, self -sufficient. His friends' preoccupations with their family concerns not only bored him but seemed to be largely pointless to him. For that reason, whenever such discussion tended to ramify he tried to stifle it.

Both Banabehari and Kedarnath were widowers. Sadananda's wife had been a languishing paralytic for twelve years now. And Lalitnarayan's spouse had been staying with their eldest son at Bombay for the last several years. Their conversation usually revolved round the family. The utmost keenness for this topic was shown by Banabehari and for good reasons too. He possessed a large family comprising four sons and three daughters. All the sons were senior bureaucrats and the three daughters had married into good families. He had much to be proud of in this area of his life, and he it was who launched the talk sessions into motion. Raring to make a mention of his son's membership of the Foreign Service and yet required to keep up appearances of polite-conversation Banabehari assumed the impassive tone of a mere reporter as he addressed the group in general :

"My third son is expected from Tokyo next month. I had written to him to bring along the daughter-in-law and the grandson also. But he says, as he is coming on official tour, it may not be convenient for him to bring his family on this trip."

Aniruddha, wise to his companion's conversational ploys asked, feigning forgetfulness:

"By the way, Banabehari Bhai, who are your son's in -laws?"

Banabehari's inflated balloon of an ego suddenly suffered a pin-prick. He had to shore up his dignity as best as he could. After a condescending pause of infinite patience, he spoke with a contrived cuteness in his voice.

"Didn't I tell you ? He is married to a Japanese girl."

Sensing that the shoring-up had not been adequate he spoke again; more to reassure himself, than to impress others.

"But then in comparison to our native brides she makes a better grade; petite, deferential and docile, she is just like a doll."

Unsparing Aniruddha beat the topic to its frothy best in order to bring out the self-deceiving smugness in the statement.

"Your assessment of our native brides is a classic case of a prophet being seldom honoured in his own country. More so, because if I remember correctly your Japanese daughter-in-law has never set her foot here. And I don't think you have ever set your eyes on her !"

Checkmated, Banabehari had to make a move and with compensatory aggressiveness he blurted out :

"Ridiculous ! Listen to him. Everyone knows the wedding was performed here. No?"

It was a wrong move. Aniruddha closed in for the kill.

"And that was fifteen years ago. No?"

The thrust and parry made the atmosphere bitter and intolerably tense. Someone had the good sense to attempt a digression from the subject and chose the civil services.

"I don't know what you fellows think about it. But I find the quality of our civil services is degenerating beyond repair. Damned mediocrity ! "

Banabehari clutched at this rescue-buoy, as it were, and jumped into the discourse.

"I entirely agree with you there. Where is the patience, the motivation and the dedication? The latterday attitude has been one of getting something for nothing. Nothing worthwhile is achievable with such a mindset. And while at it, I am reminded of my English professor in the College, Sri Abanindranath Mukhopadhyay, who used to tell us ....."

They grew relaxed and warmth returned to the club. The session stood adjourned with the bells ringing in the school-building close by.

The Club's conversation at times touched upon the tragic in life, the personal sorrows of its members. The unhappiness normally could not be

spelt in detail for fear of vulgarisation; nor could it be bottled up inside oneself to suffocation. In such situations the narrator usually swallowed up the offensive details and released the palliated urbanised innuendo for the consumption of the Club. Kedarnath's account, the other day, of his daughter-in-law's excessive concern for his health had been one such censored version of a tale of woe. He had confided to his companions:

"I suppose, with age, one loses one's sense of perspective. In spite of all the care the sons and daughters-in-law bestow upon one, there still lurks a gnawing sense of being unwanted. My own eldest daughter-in-law for instance is obsessively solicitous about my well-being. I am prone at times to a feeling of disaffection, followed by a sense of guilt at having taken an uncharitable view of her. From the day my physician hinted the possibility of my having diabetes, she rigidly applied the regimen of 'no-sugar' for me. And that included sugar in the tea as well. Now, after a lifetime of drinking sugared tea, the sugar-less tea refused to go down the gullet! At the same time the doctor's warning could not be taken lightly; could it?

The expression 'doctor's warning' struck an odd note for Kedarnath's companions as they viewed his fine-fettle alongside. Aniruddha remarked, acidly,

"I say, it could be a novel way to economise on household expenses in these days of spiralling inflation!"

Kedarnath felt the snub and weakly acted out a charade of patrician protectiveness.

"I.... I don't think it is anything like that, Aniruddha. The daughter-in-law is really very considerate --- she is."

Even as he said this, Kedarnath felt the lack of conviction in his own voice. He refrained from dwelling again on the daughter-in-law's bonafides.

"Bravo! Kedarnath! She certainly is incomparable", wise - cracked Aniruddha.

Such trenchancy in his utterances often savaged everyone around Aniruddha. Truth it might be but bitter it surely was. Aniruddha appeared to be temperamentally driven to such utterances against his own good sense. He had the perpetual urge for instant release of every passing thought or emotion that formed inside him, irrespective of its effect on those present near him. The brutal frankness with which he discussed subjects like Death

set him apart from his friends. And yet, no one had been known to interrupt him nor had his views ever been held up to ridicule. Deference to the President was perhaps the unwritten protocol of the 'Ashia Sabha' or The Octogenerians' Club.

It had rained continuosly during all the three days of the "Raja" festival. Such rains were not usual for the locality. From the first day of the festival the showers continued almost without stop. The sky covered with black clouds not only darkened the heavens, it also dampened the spirit of the creatures on earth. The sessions of the five friends had suffered a forced abeyance; it had not been possible even to get together at one place. And in the meanwhile, talking points inside each one's cranium had been raring to be unleashed!

It was 11 A.M., June the fifteenth. The announcement had come unexpectedly. Aniruddha's tried and tested factotum, Dina, made the rounds in the settlement and informed his friends, sobbing :

"My master passed away at day-break, Sir. There was no forewarning for this mishap. The attending physician pronounced it to be a case of cardiac arrest."

By the time the members reached Aniruddha's place there was nothing worthwhile to be seen or done. The cynic's familiar face had been covered with a white shroud and the sooty smoker's lips ever delighting in censorious *badinage* had suddenly fallen silent forever. The transformation wrought upon their friend was frightening. Each one of them had then got pitchforked as it were, to the familiarity of his everyday home in the company of a nameless pestilential dread.

The rains ceased the next day although the sun in the east emerged paler than usual. They sat huddled together in the park, under the Krushnachuda tree; not five, only four of them. Today the four experienced an overwhelming sense of loss, a void; as if the removal of a single being had rendered the existence of the entire group meaningless. None of the four had this day the urge to prove himself in the forum. Instead, all were found engaged in silent musing, and each one's musing ran along the following lines:

"Just like this, one of these days the morning would see that my place on this bench is empty. Others would grieve, shed tears and then return to everyday living."

The thought of the world resuming its diurnal course and of themselves being relegated to a niche in man's memory only hit them as a dire dispensation and brought the belated realisation that the strange silence of that morning far from being a universal pause in honour of their departed friend, was merely a projection of their own magnified sense of self importance.

The spell was broken for the startled group and they fancied listening to laughter in the distance; the derisive laughter of Aniruddha, the cynic, at their exaggerated sense of self-importance.

And it came to pass after a while that Banabehari cleared his throat and thereby ushered the company into the here and now.

"Anyone saw "*The Statesman* to-day"? I would draw your attention specifically to Reagan's statement at the U.N. on nuclear disarmament. The White House and the Kremlin are engaged in the game of pointing accusing fingers at each other. The common man is taken for a ride, eh?"

"I entirely agree with you," said Sadananda. Lalitnarayan thought a note of dissent was called for and added with due gravity in his tone :

"I am sorry, friends, I cannot agree with you. Why lay all the blame at the door of the Super-powers ? Are we, I mean the Third world, entirely free from blame?"

"Comparison of Super-powers with the Third World! As absurd as comparing Heaven with Earth."

"But --------- but "

"You see ....

And within a short-while, the debate among the four friends on international political situation began to generate intense heat.

Tr. by Alekh Kumar Patnaik

ABOUT THE TRANSLATORS

1. *Bouli* has been translated by Ashok Kumar Mohapatra. He teaches English in the P.G. Dept. of Sambalpur University, Orissa.

2. *Nidashrayi* has been translated as *The Nestled* by Pabitra Mohan Nayak, a former professor of English.

3. *Nishant* has been translated by Jatindra Kumar Nayak as *Dawn*. he teaches English in the P.G. Dept. of Utkal University.

4. *Pita O Putra* has been translated as *Father and Son* by Sachidananda Mohanty, a noted essayist and critic. He is now professor of English in the University of Hyderabad.

5. *Bhaya, Prema O Genduphula* has been translated as *Love, Fear and Marigold Flowers* by Kishori Charan Das, the writer himself.

6. *Rajayoga*, has been translated by Ramshankar Nanda. He teaches English in the P.G. Dept. of Sambalpur University.

7. *Ashubha Putrara Kahani*, has been translated by Ramanendra Mohapatra titled as *Tale of the Ominous Son*. He teaches English in a Khalikote College, at Berhampur, Ganjam, Orissa.

8. *Prachakshyu*, has been translated by Dipti Ranjan Pattnaik titled as *The Spectacles*. He teaches English in the P.G. Dept of Utkal University, Orissa.

9. *Mukta O Mukti* has been translated as *The Salvation of a Silkworm* by Ramesh Prasad Panigrahi, a noted critic and playwright. He teaches English in Ravenshaw College, Cuttack.

10. *Chitrita Chadar*, has been translated by Chinmay Kumar Hota as *The Painted Sheet*. He serves as an Officer in the State Bank of India, Bhubaneswar, Orissa.

11. *Patarani*, has been translated by Jatindramohan Mohanty titled as *The Chief Queen*. A renowned critic, served as Professor of English, Utkal University.

12. *The lady who died one and half times* has been translated by its author Manoj Das. He writes both in Oriya and English and is an established figure in Indian writings.

13. *Darpana* has been translated by Aswini Kumar Mishra as *The Transcendent Mirror*. Presently serves as secretary, Orissa Sahitya Akademi.

14. *Nilamadhabara Rubaiat*, has been translated by Prafulla Kumar Mohanty as *The Rubaiat of Nilamadhaba*. A well-known critic. Taught English in Ravenshaw and Khallikote Colleges and retired as Principal Ravenshaw College.

15. *Pata Dei*, has been translated by Jayanta Mohapatra as *Lata*. A highly acclaimed poet both at the national and international level.

16. *Mokshya Chakra*, has been translated by Prafulla Kumar Mohanty titled as *Salvation Cycle*.

17. *Jibana Sangita*, has been translated by Jitendra Narayan Pattnaik titled as *Dissonant Music*. A well-known critic, taught English in different colleges of the State and now retired from service.

18. *Nisha*, has been translated as *Fumes* by Bibhuti Mishra a noted journalist and columnist.

19. *Ghatanara Nama Nain* has been translated as *A Nameless Event* by Prafulla Kumar Tripathy, the writer himself.

20. *Nachiketara Hata* has been translated as *The Ghost* by Rohini Kanta Mukherjee, noted Oriya poet and critic. Teaches English in B.J.B. College, Bhubaneswar.

21. *Sancharapatha* has been translated as *The Pathway* by Bhagaban Jaisingh, a noted poet & critic. He teaches English in Khalikote College, Ganjam.

22. *Setu* has been translated as *The Bridge* by Jai Ratan, a noted translator.

23. *Khosha* has been translated as *The Cocoon* by Lipipushpa Nayak. She teaches English in K.B. College, Baranga, Cuttack.

24. *Astitwa* has been translated as *Existence* by Rabishankar Mishra, Professor of English, Sambalpur University, Orissa.

25. *Sabda Khela* has been translated as *A Game of words* by Rabindra Kumar Swain, noted Indo-Anglian Poet. Presently serves in State Gazetters, Orissa.

26. *Kramashah Astaraga* has been translated as *And Sundown Gradually* by Anil Kumar Pattnaik, retired Director of Treasuries, Orissa.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

1. RAJKISHORE RAY (23.11.1914)

Story writer. Joined Orissa Education Service and served as Lecturer, Vice Principal, Principal and Inspector of Schools. Was the first Secretary of Orissa Sahitya Akademi in 1957. Recipient of Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for 1989 for his short story collection *Manwantarar Manaba.* His other works are *Nila Lahari, Bikacha Satadala, Manara Mrunala, Pankachandana, Durbala Debalaya, Adipurusha, Drusya Drusyantara* etc.

2. BASANTA KUMAR SATPATHY (15.2.15-)

Story writer. Toaght English in different colleges of Orissa. Recipient of Orissa Sahitya Academi Award for his short story collection *Antiromantic*. His other works are Champa (adopted play), *Sanchayana* (Poetry collection), *Naba Natika* (translated one act play), *Duiti Bharmana Kahani* (travelogue : translated), was *Pua Pain Jhia* (Story). Publicity Officer in erstwhile Mayurbhanj state (40-49). Editor, *Mayurbhanj Chronicle and Bhanja Pradeep.*

3. BIBHUTI BHUSAN TRIPATHY (10.10.1919 - 6.2.1997)

Was a member of I.A.S. Worked under Govt. of Orissa in various capacities. Conferred State Akademi Award for his story collection *Nishant.* His other story collections include *Setu and Chandana*.

4. SURENDRA MOHANTY (21.6.1922 - 21.12.1990)

Novelist, Story Writer, Essayist, Critic, Editor & Columnist. Was an M.P. for several years. President Orissa Sahitya Akademi (1981-87) Conferred State Akademi Award for his story collection, *Sabuja patra O Dhusara Golapa* and for his autobiography Patha O Pruthibi. Recipient of Central Sahitya Akademi Award & Sarala Award, His other works are *Fatamati, Nilasaila, Ajibakara Attahasa, Kalantara, Achalayatana,*

Niladri Bijay, Neti Neti, Andha Diganta, Krushna Benire Sandhya, Maralara Mrutyu, Dui Simanta, Satabdira Surya, Kulabruddha, Lord Jagannatha etc.

5. KISHORI CHARAN DAS (01.03.24)

Story Writer and Translator. Joined Indian Allied Services, served in various capacities and retired as A G, Assam. President of Orissa Sahitya Akademi(1994-97) Recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award for his story collection *Thakur Ghara* and Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for *Manihara*. His latest story collection 'The Journey is published by University of Michigan(U.S.A.). His other collections include *Bhanga Khelana, Gharabahuda, Lakshya Bihanga, Khelar Nana Ranga, Bhinna Paunsa, Sita Lahari* etc.

6. MOHAPATRA NILAMANI SAHOO (22.12.1926)

Novelist, Story Writer, Columnist and Translator. Joined Orissa Education Service, taught Oriya in various Colleges of the State. A State Akademi Award Winner for his story collection "Akash Patala." His other works are *Dhara O Dhara, Tamasi Radha, Sumitrara Hasa, Andha Ratira Surya, Abhisapta Gandharba, Pingala Se Anyajane, Anyarupa Rupantara,* Michhabagha etc.

7. ACHYUTANANDA PATI (22.06.1927)

Story Writer. Worked as Head Masters in different High Schools of the State. Conferred State Akademi Award for his story collection *Snayu O Sanyasi*. His other story collections are *Asubha Putrara Kahani, Ugrasena Ubacha, Nian jaluchhi, Chari Sangata Katha.*

8. BIJOYKRUSHNA MOHANTY (13.04.28)

Story writer and Novelist. Conferred Orissa Sahitya Akademi award for 1991 for his story collection *Prachakshvu.* His other story collections are *Tathapi, Swarabhanga.* Bhala Paibara Ashru, Nibhruta Sanlapa(both novels).

9. DURGAMADHAB MISHRA (12.11.1929 - 3.2.1997)

Poet and story writer. Joined I.P.S. and served in various capacities in several places of Orissa and India. Rcipient of Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for his story collection *Nishadara Nisabda Barana.* His other collections are *Mandakranta, Tara O Timira, Phalgure Banya, Muthie Mati Chinae Akasha. Brutta O Abartta etc.*

10. KRUSHNA PRASAD MISHRA (19.4.1933 - 13.2.1994)

Story writer, Novelist, Essayist and Critic. Served as Professor of Philosophy in Utkal University. Had published a number of research articles both in English and Oriya in different journals. Recipient of Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for 1985 for his story collection, *Chitrita Chadara.* His other story collections are *Mounavati Ratri, Kritadasira Kavya, Naegra O Devajani. Aranya O Upabana, Paschima, Bhrugu Samhita* etc; His novels include *Mruga Trushna, Singha Kati Nepathya*, *Darshana O Samalochana* and Chetanar Seema are his essay collections.

11. RAJESWARI DALABEHERA (13.10.33)

Novelist and Story writer. Conferred Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for her story collection '*Chora Chaitali*'. She has a novel entitling *Santapta Godhuli* to her credit.

12. MANOJ DAS (27.02.34)

Story writer, Novelist Critic and Columnist Teaches English at Sri Aurobindo International centre of Education, Pondicherry. Was editor 'The Heritage for sometime. Conferred Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for his story collection *Aranyaka.* Recipient of Central Sahitya Akademi Award and Sarala Award, Saraswati Samman. His other story collections are *Laxmira Abhisar, Abu Purusha O Anyanya Kahani. Bhinna Manisha O Anyanaya Kahani, Manoj Pancha Binsati A Song for Sunday And Other stories, The Crocodile's lady and other stories.*

13. CHAUDHURY HEMAKANTA MISHRA (13.04.35)

Story writer. Conferred Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for 1976 for his story collection, *'Nishiddha Pustaka.'* His other works are *Kurulia Galpa, Aghatana Sankalana* etc.

14. RABI PATTNAIK (21.10.1935 - 3.6.1991)

Story writer. Conferred Orissa Sahitya Akademi award for his story collection *Hiranyagarva*. His other works are " Asamajikara Diary, *Ragatodi*, Andhagalira *Andhakara, Bahurupi, Bishuba Rekha, Raja rani, Bandhya Gandharai, Amarilata, Bichitrabarna.*

15. BINAPANI MOHANTY (11-11-36)

Novelist and Story writer. Joined Orissa Education Service and served as Lecturer and Reader in Economics in different Colleges of the State. Recipient of Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for her story collection *'Kasturi Mruga OO Sabuja Aranya'* and Central Sahitya Akademi Award for her collection, *'Patadei'*. Her other collections are *Ashru Anala, Sakunira Chhaka, Drusyantara, Kunti Kuntala Sakuntala.*

16. UMASANKAR MISHRA (22.12.1937)

Story writer. Joined Orissa Administrative Service and worked under Govt. of Orissa in various capacities Conferred Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for his story collection *Bohu Bohuka.* His other anthologies are *Sweta Anruta,Trisanku, Nua Satabdir Faguna etc.*

17. DEBRAJ LENKA (24.5.1939)

Novelist and Story writer. Recipient of Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for 1994 for his story collection *Gan Gan Aha Aha ;* His other collections are *Debrajar Orchestra, Gotie Baksa Galpa*. His novels are *Joker, Andha Muhani, Prema Nagarira Aneka Katha, Anwesha Anweshana.*

18. PURNANANDA DANI (21.4.1943)

Story writer, eassayist and critic. Now reader in Oriya in Larambha

College, Sambalpur. Honoured with the Orissa Sahitya Akademi award for 1987 for his story collection. *'Nisha'*. His other story collections are *Bagichar Pilamane, Kaliya Dalana O Anyanya Galpa, Haladi Kiar* etc. *Odia Aitihasika Upanyasa* is his book of criticism.

19. PRAFULLA KUMAR TRIPATHY (25.8.1945)

Story writer, Poet and critic. Obtained his Ph.D degree in English from Utkal University. Entered Orissa Education Service in 1969 and taught English in different colleges of the State. Now Reader in English, BJB College, Bhubaneswar. Recipient of Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award, 1977 for his story collection, *Nija Singhasana*. His other works are *Anyanya Kavita, Saptaha O Anya Sata, Amari, E Nadi De Nira, Ayatana, Sambalpuri Odia Sabdakosh* etc.

20. UTTAM KUMAR PRADHAN : (29.9.1947)

Story writer ; Joined Orissa Administrative Service in 1973 and then Orissa Finance Service in the same year and served in various capacities. Conferred State Akademi Award for his story collection, *Nachiketar Hata*. His other story collection is *Budhiani O Bruddha Prajapati*.'

21. TARUNKANTI MISHRA (3.8.1950)

Story writer. A Post Graduate from Utkal University and East Anglia University, London. Joined I.A.S. in 1975 and served the Govt. of Orissa in various capacities. Now, Secretary to Govt. of Orissa in Home Department. Recipient of Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for his story collection, *'Bitansha'*. Honoured with the prestigious Sarala Award for 2001. His other works include *Abasttars Duiti Swara, Nisangatara Swara, Komala Gandhar, Bahubrihi, Prajapatira Dena Nahin, Akash Setu* etc.

22. JASHODHARA MISHRA (6.1.1951)

Story writer. Her many stories have been translated into English and

other major Indian languages and published in different journals. Recipient of Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for 1990 for her story collection *Janharati*. Her other works are Dwipa O Anyanya Galpa, Dekhanahari etc.

23. HRUSHIKESH PANDA (01.05.1955)

Story writer, Novelist, Dramatist & Lyricist. Post graduated in Chemistry from Utkal University. I.A.S. topper in 1979. Joined Orissa cadre and has been hopeling important positions in state administration. Recipient of Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for 1995 for his story collection, *Proudha Bhabana*. His other story collections are Bahar *Chhidahoithiba Loka, Rebati, Saheb Debata*. His novels are *Sun Sahita Samaika Sandhi,Harina Pithire Ajana Suryastaku, Sunaputra Loke, Subarna Dwipa* etc. His dramas include *Sabdantara, 1999, Athaba Panchajana engreja* etc.

24. SAROJINI SAHOO (04.01.1956)

Story writer. Serving as Lecturer in Belpahad College, Recipient of Bisuva Award and Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for 1993 for her story collection *Amruta Pratikshyare*. Her other works are *Sukhar Muhan Muhin, Nija Gahirare Nije, Tarali Jaithiba Durga, Choukatha* etc.

25. JAYANTI RATH (09.07.1960)

Story writer and Poet. Working as Asst. Curator in Orissa State Museum, Bhubaneswar. Conferred Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for her story collection, *Sabda Khela*. Her other story collections include *Jatrarambha, Bhinna Barnabodha, Chhayapatha, Asatya Balaya, Khela Chuti* etc. *Salini, Jibanapatra Mo* are her poetry collections.

26. SUSMITA BAGCHI (25.09.1960)

Story writer; Recipient of Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for 1992 for her story collection, *Akasha Jeunthi Katha Kahe*. Her other collection is *'Chhai Sepakha Manisha.'*

Oriss   Orids in the eastern regon of India covering an area of 1,55,717 sovare kilometers. With the Bay of Bengal as its coastal boundary and tle Eastern *Ghats* as high land plateau, thase prime physiographic entities havı shsped the imagination of many creatioı artists including the writers here. Oriya is ihe spoken language of the state.

Orissa Sahitya Akademi, in fuitherance of its activities, arranges translation of literary works from different Indian languages into Oriya and aso from foreign languages like English pto Oriya and *vice versa*.

This collection is of finely writan stories by twentysix Akademi winneatt The English rendering has been done iy a banel of translators who have trird their best to catch the rhythm and inrer beauty of the original Oriya. The stornis are somewhat evocative of real life patterns in an average Oriya farrily underplaying all other exotic mannen alien to the soil.

Cσ
Manadi at Sonepur

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